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Introduction

I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously with me...¹

In his ‘Preface to the reader’, Descartes famously warns his reader about the challenges which lie ahead. Though oft-quoted, its significance is not always fully recognised. This thesis focuses on the word ‘meditate’, considering the significance of the role of meditation within the *Meditations*. By asking questions as to the nature and extent of the influence of the meditational genre on the *Meditations*, the thesis will consider how illuminative the genre is for interpreting the work. Essentially, I pose the question: why is the *Meditations* so called? I suggest that such an examination will prove highly illuminative, revealing a deeper significance to this important text.

The *Meditations*: ‘An ingenious exploration of failure’?

In 1637, Descartes wrote in a letter that

Most intelligent people, if they take the trouble not only to read but also to meditate in an orderly way on the same topics on which I claim to have meditated myself ... will draw the same conclusions as I did...²

¹ Descartes, ‘Preface to the Reader’, in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. J. Cottingham (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 8

Please note: Subsequent references to this work will use the abbreviated title *Meditations*.

² Descartes, ‘Letter to an unnamed correspondent’, in D.M. Clarke, *Descartes: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 188

Published in 1641, the last decade of Descartes' relatively short life (he died, aged, fifty-four, in Stockholm, while serving as philosophy teacher to Queen Christina),³ the *Meditations* remains widely regarded as a classic in the philosophical canon. This is interesting in itself, considering the reception Descartes' text has had. The history of 'Cartesian' scholarship has been plagued with heavy criticism, not to mention pervasive misunderstanding, crude caricaturising and misrepresentation. By shifting the focus onto a different approach to the *Meditations* – from a 'meditational' perspective – this thesis will offer a more sympathetic reading of the *Meditations*, in order to portray Descartes as a more positive contributor to theology.

John Cottingham summarises well the problem history has had of interpreting this often-enigmatic thinker, and is therefore worth quoting at length:

More than perhaps any other subject, philosophy has a tendency to canonize, or to demonize, the great figures of its past. Of these two opposite tendencies, over-reverential hagiography is a lesser danger ... than the kind of polemicism that wildly caricatures famous dead philosophers in order to dismember their supposed doctrines. The fate of Descartes in the twentieth century is a spectacular example of this latter process, so much so that the label "Cartesian" has become in many quarters almost a term of abuse, designating all the confusions and errors from which today's philosophical champions claim to protect us: an obscurantist immaterialism in the philosophy of mind; a suspect foundationalism in epistemology; an incoherent subjectivism in the theory of meaning; a blinkered optimism in the philosophy of science ... a problem of perspective arises; how are we to discern the significance of the arguments Descartes advances, and the force of the claims he puts forward, when so much of our vision is clouded by the heavy accretion of subsequent interpretation and criticism?⁴

In the course of my research on the *Meditations*, I have encountered similar difficulties, and as such, I agree with Cottingham that a fresh approach is called for.

³ See Clarke, 402-407

⁴ J. Cottingham, in *Descartes' Meditations: Background Source Materials*, trans. R. Ariew, J. Cottingham, T. Sorell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), xiii-xiv

Something particularly worthy of comment is a trend I identified while reading some of the vast literature there is on the subject of the *Meditations*; issues are compartmentalised and ‘dealt with’, and consequently the importance of the interdependency of these elements is underestimated. Literary considerations are either non-existent or sidelined, mentioned in passing but not integrated into the interpretation itself; furthermore, such accounts tend to neglect to consider how the whole text hangs together. Essentially, the ‘philosophical’ is given priority over the ‘literary’; the questions of style, form and genre. I think that the main reason for this heavily one-sided approach to the *Meditations* is not necessarily that of a total disregard for the ‘literary’ considerations (although the importance of these considerations is often underestimated), but rather because many commentaries on the text tend to isolate individual philosophical issues, dissecting them in order to try and ‘solve’ a problem identified in the text, or provide a new account of why such problems threaten the very coherence of Descartes’ project. They are less attentive to the approach than they are to the quest to ‘solve’ the perceived Cartesian dilemmas, such as the charge of circularity levelled at Descartes, or the difficulties inherent in the ontological argument. Such compartmentalisation, as evidenced throughout the literature on the *Meditations*, is damaging to our understanding of the text because it neglects to consider the way the text hangs together as a whole, complete entity; how it is ‘knit together by a narrative synthesis without which the *Meditations* would be a fragmentary, unsuccessful pastiche of discrete arguments.’⁵ I argue that responsible and fruitful interpretation demands that the part be viewed in relation to the whole.

As such, this thesis will provide an alternative approach, suggesting that a consideration of the *Meditations* as meditation is highly illuminative for a deeper understanding of the text. It is not concerned with rescuing Descartes from the technical philosophical criticism outlined above; although I will attempt to defend Descartes in some capacity, it will not, in the main, be in the technicalities of his philosophical argument but rather in the formulation of a recovery project for *how* Descartes should be read. The salvage operation calls for a quite different approach, and one which is rooted in an investigation of the title. It is fair to say that if we

⁵ E.T. Flood, ‘Descartes’ Comedy of Error’, *MLN*, Vol. 102, No. 4, French Issue (Sep., 1987), 851 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2905794> (17/03/2011)

investigate the *Meditations* by isolating philosophical problems, then I do not think that Descartes can always be rescued. What I do think, though, is that it is time to take a fresh – and sympathetic – look at the project of the *Meditations*. If we reform the way we read Descartes, the problems identified may take on a rather different hue.

Much of the thesis will take on a character of literary analysis, because it will ask questions of the stylistic features of the text, in order to respond to the central question of if, and in what way, the style and presentation opted for by Descartes render it a ‘meditational’ piece. The *Meditations* is, of course, a work of philosophy (and arguably a masterpiece at that), but it is also a work of literature, and so the literary considerations can never be sidelined in favour of a purely philosophical focus. Indeed, this introduces a broader theme which will run through the thesis: I do not wish to condone a dichotomisation of the ‘philosophical’ and ‘literary’ approaches to the text. Rather, I wish to suggest an approach in which these two aspects are not only mutually respectful, but also mutually dependent. To this end, I will present in this thesis how a literary analysis could take shape, and how this might lend illumination to the philosophical ideas contained within the text; not least because it is through the mode of expression of these ideas that we encounter, and come to understand, them. The style in which Descartes writes, expresses, supports and illuminates the ideas, contributing to their structure, impact and elucidation.

Essentially, these considerations are not important simply in order to form a more ‘rounded’ account of the text, but because they lend a vitally important insight into the very meaning and purpose of the text. A consideration of the influence of the meditational genre on the *Meditations* necessarily involves questions of style and form, and will illuminate our understanding as to the possible motivations Descartes had for writing the text in the way he did, and for writing it at all.

I want to consider afresh Descartes’ *Meditations* as a positive contribution to theology, by shifting the focus from his arguments and theories to a consideration of

how, and why, he wrote the text in the first place, and what effect this has on the act of reading the *Meditations*, not merely as a reader, but as a participant. This theme will run throughout this thesis, informing how we approach the text.

Flood rightly comments that ‘in spite of all philosophical differences as to its meaning, the work retains its powerful hold on your imaginations.’⁶ In view of this Cartesian intrigue, we need to rethink how we approach the text, in order to build a more fruitful interpretation of the *Meditations*.

The *Meditations* as Meditation: Initial Considerations

There exists some research in this area of the meditational influence on the *Meditations*. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, for example, emphasises that

Descartes urges his readers not to interpret the *Meditations* as a work composed of a set of separate and disjoined theses, but rather to follow him in his meditational exercises.⁷

Consequently, the essays in the collection she edits

Focus on a set of specific texts in the *Meditations*, to analyse their functions in the meditational development of the work, bearing in mind the traditional form of the

⁶ Flood, 848

⁷ A. Oksenberg Rorty, ‘Preface’, in A. Oksenberg Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Descartes’ Meditations* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1986), ix

genre of such writing, as well as Descartes' rational revision of the meditational mode.⁸

Although Oksenberg Rorty's work offers a helpful insight into how the meditational genre plays out in the *Meditations*, and how it affects our view of the philosophical ideas expressed (both are key themes, and as such, I will draw on her findings in the course of this thesis), she appears to make an assumption that the *Meditations* are evidence of meditational writing in the first place. As will become increasingly clear, I agree that the *Meditations* are to be viewed as meditational writing – but I think it is important to establish a basic connection between this text and the meditational genre, before considering how this actually plays out in the *Meditations*. As such, the first chapter of this thesis will be concerned with establishing such a connection; this will provide a solid basis on which to build in the following chapters, in order to demonstrate how the influence of the meditational genre on Descartes' work is illuminative to our understanding of it.

Similarly, L.J. Beck has done some significant work on this theme, giving attention to the idea of the *Meditations* as 'a spiritual exercise'.⁹ His work will be shown to be useful in the middle chapter of this thesis, offering particularly valuable insight into the nature and role of philosophy in Descartes' time, and into Descartes' somewhat puzzling distinction between analytic and synthetic modes of reasoning. However, the findings of his chapter on the *Meditations* as a spiritual exercise, although illuminative, do not extend so far as to inform the rest of his work. As such, I see potential for taking this theme much further, considering how it plays out in the text.

Furthermore, Zeno Vendler's article focuses specifically on the influence of St Ignatius of Loyola's influence on the *Meditations*,¹⁰ through his widely influential

⁸ Ibid., xi

⁹ See L.J. Beck, *The Metaphysics of Descartes: A Study of the Meditations* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 28-38

¹⁰ Z. Vendler, 'Descartes' Exercises', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Jun., 1989)

meditational work, *Spiritual Exercises*, published in 1548. Ignatius and his writing will be introduced in the first chapter of this thesis, and will serve as the particular example of meditational writing that directly – and indirectly – influenced Descartes. The thesis will, like Vendler, argue for a textual connection between these two particular meditational pieces. However, Vendler's article is only helpful to a certain extent; whilst I agree with his basic premise – that the *Meditations* evidence the influence of the *Spiritual Exercises* – he can be used as an example of the danger of overstating this connection between Ignatius and Descartes. This critique of his article will serve as a springboard into how best to appropriate and interpret the basic connection between Ignatius and Descartes, and therefore between Descartes and the meditational tradition.

These three writers in particular contribute to the findings of this thesis, and, as demonstrated above, each lend a particular aspect of illumination. However, this focus on the meditational nature of the *Meditation* is certainly not representative of the mainstream of Cartesian scholarship. True, some writers have nodded to the significance of considering the stylistic aspects and genre choice of the *Meditations*, but it tends to be as one consideration among many. Furthermore, the writers aforementioned either seem to make the assumption of *Meditations* being a 'meditational' piece of writing, or treat it as one aspect among many to be studied, in order to gain a fuller picture of how the *Meditations* functions as a text. I want to go to the root of the issue of meditation in the text, asking the fundamental question: why is the *Meditations* so called? I want to really put the spotlight on this issue, arguing that it is of integral importance for a fair, and full, interpretation. I am calling for a fresh approach to the text, considering the nature and extent of the meditational influence on the *Meditations*, and Descartes' possible motivation for doing so. The title of the text can reveal hidden elements to the work.

Furthermore, rethinking the way we read the text challenges us to find different ways to judge it, not within the vocabulary of 'success' or 'failure', but in

ways which defy these parameters. The biggest mistake to make with the *Meditations* is to fall prey to the deceptive simplicity of the text. In the preface to his influential work on Descartes (a text whose insight will prove to be illuminative throughout this thesis), L.J. Beck makes reference to a helpful quotation by Kemp Smith:

The *Meditations* may seem, on first acquaintance, to hold promise of easy understanding. Yet how difficult they are found to be when closely studied.¹¹

The text does, indeed, present itself to the reader as accessible; and therein lies one of its greatest merits. However, what Kemp Smith is drawing attention to here is the wonderfully multi-layered character of the *Meditations*; it can be read on many different levels, but is best appreciated – and understood – as a complex text which admits of various interpretations. The problems encountered in the *Meditations* are not ones which lend themselves to simple answers – arguably not to any answers, as such, at all – but they are, I argue, lent some illumination by an approach to the text that is constantly informed by Descartes’ motivation for writing, and his mode of expression. Yet not enough attention is given to what it might actually mean to *meditate* with Descartes, and certainly not of the way that an understanding of this has the power to transform the way we understand the text. Indeed, to ‘meditate’ with him is, I will argue, Descartes’ invitation to read the text in a certain way; we cannot talk of a ‘meditational aspect’ or a ‘meditational element’ to the *Meditations*; rather, meditation is about the very nature, purpose and meaning of the text. This centrality of the importance of meditation to the *Meditations* is the driving force of this thesis. I hold it to be of great significance, but not yielding any simple (or consistently obvious) results.

¹¹ Beck, v

Mapping the project

To recap: I hold that the way we read the *Meditations* is important, by way of assessing the influence of the meditational genre on Descartes' text. Essentially, I wish to persuade the reader of the worth of this approach, and suggest that it should inform the direction of Cartesian scholarship, leading to a more positive evaluation of Descartes' contribution to theology. I want to awaken in the reader a literary appreciation for the text, by challenging the text, and asking the questions of form and shape as well as content; style as well as the philosophical ideas expressed.

The thesis will, firstly, trace the history of meditation and introduce the figure of Ignatius, in order to establish a basic historical-biographical connection between Ignatius and Descartes. Vendler's article will be used as an introduction to the textual connection, and will serve as an example of how overstating this connection can be misguided, and misleading. The second chapter will shift the focus onto what Descartes writes, regarding why he chose to title the *Meditations* as he did; here, he presents meditation mainly as a viable alternative to disputation, as a mode of philosophical argument. Giving Descartes a voice in this second chapter will inform the discussion of the third and final chapter, which considers why Descartes might have *actively* chosen the Ignatian meditational genre to influence and inform his *Meditations*. As such, this final chapter is more speculative in character, using the findings of the previous two chapters to build a fuller picture of the contribution of the meditational genre to how we view, read and interpret the *Meditations*. As the thesis progresses, the case is gradually built up that there is a clear and tangible influence of the Ignatian meditational genre on Descartes' text; and that to approach it in this way affects how we interpret the individual elements of the text. The typical 'problems' of the *Meditations* take on a rather different character when viewed from the perspective of treating the *Meditations* as a piece of meditation writing.

I am assuming the reader has some basic degree of familiarity with the *Meditations*, with the structure of the text and the essential arguments contained

within. However, I hope that it will be accessible in a way that reflects the text itself. A key thread running through this thesis will be an emphasis on the importance of the reader's participation in the *Meditations*; that it is not simply a text to be read, but a meditation to be meditated, along with Descartes. He encourages his readers to meditation *with* him, and therefore the exploration of the issues contained within this discussion should reflect this active process. The focus here will be on asserting the importance of an approach to the text which is informed by its title, and in doing so will suggest alternative ways of handling some of the perceived 'problems' of the text.

Detailing the Chapters

Chapter One is concerned with tracing the history of meditation, from Marcus Aurelius, through St. Augustine, and culminating in the Christian spiritual meditation of the sixteenth century, and thereby introduces the key figure of St. Ignatius of Loyola. It is the Ignatian form of meditational writing in particular that will inform the rest of the thesis. The first part of the chapter, therefore, is concerned with locating Descartes within the wider tradition of meditation; and to establish a basic historical-biographical connection between Ignatius and Descartes. The second section will start to look at the Ignatius-Descartes connection in more depth, approaching it from an angle of textual analysis. The discussion of the nature and extent of the *textual* connection between Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* and Descartes' *Meditations* – which is a central thread running through the thesis – will be started by considering Zeno Vendler's assessment of how the texts relate to one another. While agreeing with some aspects of Vendler's account, I highlight how a temptation to overstate the apparent similarities between the texts can lead to a misrepresentation of both authors' aim, method and presentation. By focusing on two particular examples of textual parallels which Vendler cites, the latter part of the chapter demonstrates how Vendler stakes too much on the presence of clear and consistent parallels, such that the subtlety and complexity of the connection risks being disregarded. Oversimplification by overstatement must be avoided, and this warning will inform the considerations of the rest of the thesis.

Chapter Two shifts the focus to what Descartes himself has to say about why his work is titled *Meditations*; this chapter is concerned with giving Descartes a voice. It will draw on the *Objections* and *Replies* writings between Descartes and his contemporaries, in response to the first edition of the *Meditations*. Selected thinkers highlight any dubious aspects of Descartes' argument and offer constructive criticism; Descartes responds to these comments, defending the arguments within the text. As such, it is a helpful place to find out important information about the *Meditations*, from Descartes himself, and therefore this chapter will focus in particular on ascertaining why Descartes chose to title the *Meditations* as he did, and what his comments might mean for the project of reading the text. Interestingly, Descartes frames the issue in terms of 'meditation' constituting a viable alternative to that of 'disputation'. Consequently, the first part of the chapter considers the reason behind Descartes' distaste for disputation, before moving on to consider where this fits into Descartes' more general distinction between the analytic and synthetic modes of philosophical reasoning, and the role of the syllogism in Descartes' thought. This chapter, therefore, uses what Descartes has to say about his choice of *Meditations* for his text's title to create a fuller picture of the epistemological system at work in the *Meditations*. The chapter culminates in the use of the *cogito* section of the *Meditations* as a case study for putting Descartes' comments into action, assessing how what he writes about the methodology employed in the text affects how the reader views the 'problem' of the *cogito*.

Informed by the discoveries of the second chapter, Chapter Three picks up the Ignatian strand of meditation introduced in the first chapter, and considers why Descartes might have *actively* chosen the meditational genre to inform and influence his *Meditations*. Meditation will be discussed not simply as a viable alternative to disputation (as was the focus in the second chapter), but rather as a positive choice in itself. This final chapter has a dual concern: it will examine both how the *Meditations* bears significant relation to the Ignatian meditational tradition; and why Descartes' would seek this affinity. The nature and extent of the connection between the *Meditations* and the *Spiritual Exercises* will be considered afresh, drawing on

particular areas of textual affinity, such as meditation as a ‘thinking in progress’, the creation of an environment conducive to meditation, and the key concept of ‘meditation as transformation’.

This thesis will conclude, therefore, that Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* have a significant influence on the genre, style, form and expression of Descartes’ *Meditations*. To approach the *Meditations* from the perspective of treating it as a piece of meditational writing will be shown to be highly illuminative for a deeper understanding of this important text. Such an approach will also lead to a more sympathetic interpretation of some of the more problematic areas of the *Meditations*; and while I do not claim to solve any of the philosophical dilemmas and problems contained within this complex text, I hope that the reader will be inclined to approach these difficulties from the more sympathetic perspective created by understanding the meditational mode of the text. Ultimately, I seek, through consideration of all these (necessarily) interrelated issues, to convince the reader of Descartes’ position as a positive contribution to theology.

Chapter One: Introducing Meditation

Introduction

Stohrer asks the key question:

Does the textual evidence in Descartes' writings warrant the judgement that there is a pattern of dependence by Descartes on the methodological principles and directives of Ignatius, as developed in the *Spiritual Exercises*?¹²

This question will inform the investigation of this thesis, starting with this chapter's exploration of the relationship of Descartes' *Meditations* to the meditational tradition at the time of his writing, namely in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola. This chapter will form a basic picture of the connection between Descartes and the tradition of meditational writing – in particular that of Ignatius – which will pave the way for further investigation in the later chapters, in order to attempt to understand better the nature and extent of the relationship between the two texts, and what Descartes meant by entitling his work *Meditations*.

To this effect, the first chapter centres around two key sections: the first is a consideration of how the relationship between the two texts might have come about; by examining historical and biographical factors, I suggest how and why Descartes would have been familiar with the Ignatian meditational tradition. The second section focuses on how the connection between the two texts might be misrepresented, by way of overstating. I examine the danger of drawing parallels between Ignatius and Descartes which do not stand up to scrutiny in an examination of the texts themselves, and so reveal themselves to be either inconsistent or tenuous.

¹² W.J. Stohrer, 'Descartes and Ignatius Loyola: La Flèche and Manresa Revisited', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Jan., 1979), 26
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/hph/summary/v0/7/17.1stohrer.html>

I will conclude that the overstatement of the connection is neither a helpful nor fruitful way of reading the texts, and of understanding how they relate. Such overstatement risks oversimplifying a complex – and often subtle – textual connection, and misrepresenting the textual evidence.

However, what does become clear is that there are significant ‘hints’ at a textual connection, which, although overstated by some because of being taken literally on a superficial level, will prove important – indeed, integral – to our understanding of why Descartes chose to present his text in the way that he did. So, the latter part of this first chapter looks to one extreme of the interpretation of the connection between the two texts. The second chapter will then shift the focus to examining what Descartes himself writes about why he titled his work *Meditations*, before the third chapter considers further possible motivations for employing the meditational genre, and how this plays out in the text.

Let me now introduce in more detail the structure of this first chapter. The first part, concerning historical and biographical factors, will open by roughly outlining the key players in the meditational tradition, up until we reach Descartes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This will enable us to contextualise the tradition, and locate Descartes within it; an appreciation of the evolution of the tradition is integral to understanding Descartes’ relationship to it, and his employment of it in the *Meditations*. It is vital throughout this thesis that the *Meditations* is contextualised, in relation to the tradition preceding it; Descartes should be viewed, I argue, as simultaneously a product of his tradition, and as a transformer of genre. Secondly, I will assess how Descartes would have been aware of – indeed, familiar with – the Ignatian meditational tradition by considering his Jesuit education at La Flèche. If a basic historical connection between Ignatius and Descartes can be established, then we are in a solid position to assess what the nature, and extent, of the textual connection might be. The third part will briefly sketch the figure of St. Ignatius of Loyola, and the form and character of his influential text, the *Spiritual Exercises*.

The second section of this first chapter will consider how overstating the connection between Descartes' *Meditations* and the Ignatian meditational tradition of the *Spiritual Exercises* leads to a reading of the texts that is neither helpful nor fruitful for our task. I will refute Vendler's thesis, which argues that there is a strong and explicit textual basis for establishing a relationship between the two texts, such that the *Meditations* is both informed by, and dependent on, the *Spiritual Exercises*. I pick up on the key areas of contention that I have identified; namely, the issue of the 'prescriptive' nature of the *Meditations* in comparison to the *Spiritual Exercises*, and the presentation of 'time' in the two texts. The drawing of parallels which are weak, superficial, and which result in tenuousness, evidences a misrepresentation of the two texts, based on an overstatement of the connection. In doing this, I do not disregard the frequent elements of similarity encountered when reading the texts of Ignatius and Descartes side by side; indeed, this will inform the development of my thesis. My project here is simply to show that, despite the existence of whisperings of a connection, an overstatement of this textual connection is both misguided and misrepresentative. What is more, 'since Descartes made no references to the *Exercises* in his works, the problems inherent in such a hypothesis are compounded'.¹³

We must constantly be looking to appropriate the connection both with accuracy and solid contextualisation, resisting the temptation to overstate – and, indeed, understate – the links, in order to use the Ignatian meditational genre to inform a fruitful reading of the *Meditations*, and an assessment of what a connection between the two might actually constitute.

¹³ Stohrer, 14

Establishing a Connection

Tracing the Tradition

Flood proclaims that ‘it is a truth universally acknowledged that modern philosophy commences with Descartes’.¹⁴ I think that to see how this might be so, we must examine Descartes’ relation to his past and predecessors, particularly in light of the title of his work being *Meditations*. This will enable us to discern to what extent his work can be called stylistically ‘original’, and how much it owes to the tradition in which Descartes grew up and was educated. Consideration of these issues will form one focus of this first chapter. In order to assess these issues, I will begin by briefly charting the historical development of the tradition of meditational writing.

Wherever else his originality may lie, it is certainly not to be found in opting to pen a piece of meditational writing. Within the Christian tradition, meditational writing traces back to the early centuries of the religion. However, this claim to antiquity from Christian devotional writers does not preclude the use of the genre by others in ancient society. Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*, for example – his ‘reflections on human life and death in the perspective of eternity’ – have been acclaimed as having ‘enduring power to challenge, encourage, or console’.¹⁵ This autobiographical piece detailing the honest thoughts of this Stoic philosopher-emperor recounts periods of reflection which lead to expression of self-instruction; a shaping and directing of the will is effected by use of the imperative, as exemplified in the opening line of Book Two:

Say to yourself first thing in the morning: today I shall meet people who are meddling, ungrateful, aggressive, treacherous, malicious, unsocial. All this has afflicted them through their ignorance of true good and evil. But I have seen that the nature of good is

¹⁴ Flood, 847

¹⁵ M. Hammond, ‘Introduction’, in Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, viii

what is right, and the nature of evil what is wrong; and I have reflected that the nature of the offender himself is akin to my own ... a sharing in the same mind, the same fragment of divinity.¹⁶

This working-through of his thoughts, by focused philosophical reflection in the form of meditation, in order to effect practical action, is an early exposition of philosophy as 'praxis'.¹⁷ The importance of meditation as praxis in regard to Descartes' *Meditations* will become clear as our exploration progresses and deepens. Indeed, Marcus Aurelius' 'goal is not victory in debate with himself, but a reformed and confirmed attitude directing action.'¹⁸ These second-century *Meditations* are for us a useful indication of the early activity of the meditational tradition, in the form of an individual's private musings, reflections and the determinations of one's will. As such, 'for Marcus, philosophy was the therapy of the soul. In this sense, his *Meditations* are his medications.'¹⁹

The other ancient source which I have chosen to briefly draw on is a Christian one. St. Augustine's *Confessions* has been hailed as a seminal text in the meditational tradition. Again, it takes the form of an autobiographical reflection; however, the confessional tone produced by the way in which it recounts chronologically a life lived, and truths learned, renders it more like a prayer than a piece of self-instruction. It lacks the somewhat proverbial character of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, opting instead to recount the movement from reflection to resolution: 'in the first place it is a confession of the writer's sin and error, in the second a recognition of God's goodness and truth.'²⁰ Like his Roman predecessor, however, the *Confessions* charts a turn inward in order to discover truths that lie innate in the self, stressing the importance of individual effort. Augustine draws on the faculty of the memory to recollect, consider and work through questions, resulting in reflections of gratitude:

¹⁶ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. M. Hammond (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2006), Book 2 (I), 10

¹⁷ D. Clay, 'Introduction', in Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, xxviii

¹⁸ Ibid., xxviii

¹⁹ Ibid., xxxiii

²⁰ R.S. Pine-Coffin, 'Introduction', in Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1961), 16

‘My God, let me be thankful as I remember and acknowledge all your mercies.’²¹

The closing line of the text, as the culmination of the prayer-like confession, expresses the result of the meditation as a resolution of the will:

What man can teach another to understand this truth? What angel can teach it to an angel? What angel can teach it to a man? We must ask it of you, seek it in you; we must knock at your door. Only then shall we receive what we ask and find what we seek; only then will the door be opened to us.²²

What these two great meditational writers have in common is a burning passion for discovering the ‘truth’. Following the classical conception of philosophy as a literal ‘love of wisdom’, their use of meditation as both their vehicle and praxis is telling.

The understanding of meditation as a type of prayer informed the development of the meditational tradition through the centuries, and played a central part in monastic life. One thing was especially clear, and integral to the tradition: meditation had a devotional goal. As a result of reflection on devotional scenes as well as personal experience and confession, this goal entailed effecting a change in the person, through a resolution of the will.

Now that the general background to the meditational tradition has been sketched, we must ask what form meditation was taking when Descartes enters the scene. It appears that by then, the broad field of ‘meditation’ had crystallised into something of a standard form.

²¹ Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1961), Book VIII (I), 157

²² Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius*, trans. P. Wolff (Liguori, Missouri: Triumph, 1997)

Please note: subsequent references to this work will use the abbreviated title *Spiritual Exercises*.

By the mid-sixteenth century, the Augustinian conception of meditation, as an inward turn that relied on the faculty of the memory, was giving way to the 'Ignatian' method of imagistic representation of biblical scenes, in order to focus the mind on a particular devotional theme and ensure the meditator's total involvement through dramatization (a key aspect of the Ignatian meditational form that will receive fuller attention in the third chapter). It is in this form that Descartes would have first encountered the idea and practice of spiritual, meditational exercises. Despite some telling similarities between the Augustinian style and Descartes' work (which will become apparent once the important differences between Ignatius' *Exercises* and Descartes' *Meditations* are discussed), it is the Ignatian understanding of meditation that I will be focusing on in my discussion; by using Ignatius' *Exercises* as a point of comparison, I hope to shed some light on what Descartes really had in mind when he entitled his work *Meditations*. I feel it is important to identify a particular text which we will be dealing with, from the outset, in order to properly contextualise any connection established between Ignatius and Descartes. As Rubidge rightly says,

A number of scholars have examined this topic ... Most claim that Descartes was influenced by Saint Ignatius of Loyola's handbook, the *Spiritual Exercises*. Some recent scholars, however, attempt to relate the *Meditations* to the *genre* of devotional meditations, rather than identifying a specific text or author as the source of meditational traits in Descartes' work.²³

There are two main reasons why I believe this comparative study will be illuminating for our understanding of the style and form of the *Meditations*. Firstly, the historical and cultural proximity of Descartes to Ignatius points to a direct influence of Ignatius' devotional writings on the formation of Descartes' text: this will be discussed below. Secondly, numerous scholars have speculated on the nature and extent of the literary relationship between Descartes and Ignatius, and I hold that an attempt at the clarification of this somewhat obscure and confused area of

²³ B. Rubidge, 'Descartes' *Meditations* and Devotional Meditations', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Jan.-Mar., 1990) 27-28
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2709745> (17/03/2011)

scholarly interest will enable us to understand better what Descartes' main influences were, and therefore his intentions.

At this point, therefore, an important consideration is 'the question of how Descartes, as an intellectual resident of the seventeenth century, would have known and understood the devotional genre.'²⁴ I think that the best way of approaching this is by splitting it into two questions. Firstly, how would Descartes have known the devotional genre? I aim to answer this by way of a biographical assessment of Descartes' early life and education, in order to discern key influences. This chapter will deal with this first question. The second question, therefore, regards how Descartes would have *understood* the meditational genre, and this broader question will shape the rest of the thesis. I judge this to be a more complex question than the first, not least because of the range of opinion surrounding this topic, most of which has, really, been inconclusive. By first understanding how he would have known the genre, and in particular noting key influences, we are in a clearer position to assess how Descartes would have understood the genre. From there, the thesis will consider why he might have chosen to employ the meditative genre in his writing.

Before I embark on the attempt to answer the first of these two, interrelated, questions, it is useful to consider how 'meditation' would have generally been understood in the time directly preceding Descartes' era of writing. I think the following two definitions, both offered by key players in the meditational tradition of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, encapsulate the understanding of the tradition at the time when Descartes was becoming aware of it. Firstly, the Jesuit, R. Father Vincentius Bruni, defined 'meditation' as

Nothing els but a diligent and forcible application of the understanding, to seeke, and knowe, and as it were to tast some divine matter; from whence doth arise in our

²⁴ M. Hettche, 'Descartes and the Augustinian Tradition of Devotional Meditation: Tracing a Minim Connection', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Jul., 2010), 286
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/hph/summary/v048/48.3.hettche.html> (22/06/2012)

affectionate powers good motions, inclinations, and purposes which stirre us up to the love and exercise of virtue, and the hatred and avoiding of sinne.²⁵

The religious motivation and devotional tone is evident, expressing clearly this tradition's particular and uncompromising field of focus. This totalising experiential quest is driven only by a devotional desire. St. François de Sales' definition is therefore illuminating; by 'meditation', he understands 'an attentive thought iterated, or voluntarily intertained in the mynd, to excitate the will to holy affections and resolutions.'²⁶ The age-old meditational formula of 'attentive thought' leading to the changing of the 'will' is one which is a central premise of Ignatius' *Exercises*, and will be shown to also inform Descartes' *Meditations*.

Ignatius and Descartes

It is important to consider how Descartes would have been familiar with the devotional work of St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556). Historically speaking, the suggestion of a connection between Descartes and the preceding meditative tradition is well-founded; Ignatius' work represented the culmination of a meditational tradition that had been active for centuries, as illustrated above. Therefore, when considering the nature and extent of the literary connection between Ignatius and Descartes, it is important to keep in mind that Descartes, despite his reluctance to credit his influences, is inescapably a product of his tradition; although I will argue that certain literary aspects of his work display some form of originality due to their unusual nature, I am keen to stress that Descartes achieves this by a masterful blending of tradition and novelty, borrowing selectively, yet effectively, from the tradition in which he was steeped as a youth.

²⁵ R. Father Vincentius Bruno, trans. R. Gibbons, in L.M. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 14

²⁶ St. François de Sales, 'Treatise on the Love of God' (1616), in L.M. Martz, 15

The purpose of this section is to establish, through contextualisation, a basic historical connection between Ignatius and Descartes. To do this, we need to look to Descartes' early years and education in order to form an outline of how he would have come to know the work of Ignatius. From there, we can start to build on this basic connection to paint a gradually more detailed picture of what constitutes this relationship, and what we can conclude from it.

An Enduring Education

Beck reminds us that 'it will repay us well to be puzzled at least by the word 'meditation''.²⁷ I think we need to be puzzled in a twofold way. Firstly, as will be explored later on this chapter, 'meditation' is a vague term, which denotes a wide and varied genre. For now, I am treating 'meditation' to mean what it meant to Descartes, in terms of how he would have understood it from his intellectual and religious background, in the early seventeenth century. As the thesis continues, 'meditation' will come to mean a variety of things, depending on its usage; this broadening of its meaning will be vital in discerning not *how* Descartes was familiar with the meditational genre (that is the aim of this present section), but *why* he chose to employ it to shape the *Meditations*. Secondly, we must be 'puzzled' in the sense that due attention must be paid to the fact that Descartes' text is labelled *Meditations*; this feature should alert us to something curious at play.

At this stage, to discover what Descartes would have understood by the term 'meditation', we need to look at his Jesuit education; this will enable us to comprehend what the devotional genre meant, in both theory and practice. Descartes attended La Flèche College from 1607; founded in 1604, this Jesuit college placed, alongside the curriculum of classical languages, philosophy and theology,²⁸ an emphasis on 'the spiritual development or religious training of the students', which

²⁷ Beck, 29

²⁸ Clarke, 18-19

culminated in an annual week-long retreat.²⁹ Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* was the prescribed text for the retreat, to be closely followed throughout the week, directing the activities of the students. It was here, therefore, that Descartes would have become familiar with the devotional meditative text of the founder of the Jesuits, and, poignantly – as Stohrer points out – ‘at the very time that he was experiencing his first exposure to formal philosophical reflection’.³⁰ The intertwining of these spiritual and philosophical themes in Descartes’ thought would prove to be highly significant.

The important point to note at this stage, however, is that ‘the central feature of these exercises was the regular hours devoted to the practice of meditation.’³¹ I think we can surmise from this that the week of retreat, as the central focus of a Jesuit education, would have shaped Descartes’ understanding of meditation; what is more – and crucial to our exploration of Descartes’ relationship to the existing meditational tradition – is that Descartes would therefore have actively participated in this Ignatian style of meditation. Hence I agree with Beck’s conclusion that ‘we may fairly assume that the pattern of those six-day retreats must have coloured his associations of the word meditation.’³² Having had a Jesuit education steeped in meditation, Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* clearly left an impression on Descartes. For now, I will sketch the legacy of Ignatius.

²⁹ Ibid., 28

³⁰ Stohrer, 11

³¹ Beck, 31

³² Beck, 31

Ignatius and the *Spiritual Exercises*

Descartes would have known Ignatius as

A saint, recently canonised, and celebrated throughout the world (with a splendid church soon to be dedicated to him in Rome), the founder of the most powerful religious order in Christendom, one of the giants of the Counterreformation, and precisely through his *Exercises*, a fountainhead of its new spirituality.³³

Born a Spanish aristocrat, briefly a soldier, and latterly the founder of the *Society of Jesus* in 1539, Ignatius drew on his own spiritual experiences in order to write the *Spiritual Exercises*, published in 1548. Spanning four weeks, but adaptable to shorter periods of time (Descartes would have been involved in a retreat lasting just one week),³⁴ the *Spiritual Exercises* are best defined by Ignatius himself:

By the words “Spiritual Exercises,” we should understand any method of examining our own conscience, and also of meditating, contemplating, praying mentally and orally, and finally of dealing with any other spiritual activities ... In the same way that walking, travelling, and running are corporal exercises, so preparing and disposing the soul to remove all inordinate attachments and, after they have been removed, searching and finding the will of God about the management of one’s life and the salvation of the soul are spiritual exercises.³⁵

The *Spiritual Exercises* are something of a ‘handbook’ of spirituality, through which we are led by Ignatius himself.³⁶ As well as the text of the Exercises itself,

³³

³⁴ See Ignatius, ‘Fourth Annotation’, *Spiritual Exercises*, 4: ‘It would be convenient ... to extend or shorten any Week according to the matter that is proposed.’

³⁵ Ignatius, ‘First Annotation’, *Spiritual Exercises*, 3

³⁶ Z. Vendler, ‘Descartes’ Exercises’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Jun., 1989), 196

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40231645> (11/05/2011)

Ignatius supplies his reader with ‘annotations’,³⁷ ‘some rules to be observed’,³⁸ and ‘some useful notes,’³⁹ so that the directors of retreats could follow their meditational master by way of a devotional manual.⁴⁰ In this way, its core accessibility comes to characterise this meditational text; it is inclusive, ‘hav[ing] frequently been adapted in response to the backgrounds and circumstances of individual retreatants,’⁴¹ and yet provides clear, step-by-step guidance, in prescribing a course of meditation, in order to effect a change in the individual. The changing of one’s will was evidently a central tenet of what meditation had become by this time; meditation was a method ‘by which man is led to the possibility of conquering himself and deciding on a way of conducting his life that is free from harmful attachments’.⁴²

It is, of course, of paramount importance to understand that these Exercises are, essentially, Christian devotional meditations with an uncompromisingly religious theme. Furthermore, ‘the *Exercises* do not stand alone in their kind, but represent a summary and synthesis of efforts since the twelfth century to reach a precise and widely accepted method of meditation.’⁴³ It will be vital that this is kept in mind as we delve deeper into the exploration of the literary relationship between Ignatius and Descartes. The aims of the two writers are fundamentally different. As an attempt to build the edifice of a new philosophy on solid foundations, rather than an explicitly religious devotional text, Descartes’ work represents a key divergence in subject matter.

Some Key Features

There are a few key features characterising the Ignatian meditation that I think it helpful to briefly describe, in order to get a better idea of what constitutes the

³⁷ Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises*, 3-9

³⁸ Ibid., 80-92

³⁹ Ibid., 87

⁴⁰ P. Wolff, ‘Preface’, in Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises*, ix

⁴¹ Ibid., xiii

⁴² Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises* [21], 10

⁴³ Martz, 25

Exercises. Firstly, it is set out clearly and methodically; Beck, for one, praises its ‘logical coherence’.⁴⁴ Covering four weeks, each day has its own itinerary, both explaining the wider theme, and detailing the specific instructions. Drawing on his own personal experiences, Ignatius ensures he is an attentive guide by providing a work of systematic precision. Its rigid structure, and the tone of instruction – for example, ‘a repetition has to be made of the previous Exercises’⁴⁵ – give it something of a prescriptive character. Whilst Ignatius allows for individuals to complete it at their own pace – that ‘the Exercises must be adapted to the condition of the person who is making them’⁴⁶ – beyond this concession, there appears to be little or no room for individual expression or the altering of the forms of the meditations themselves. As such, the *Spiritual Exercises* very much give the impression of being a manual to work through, under the direction of Ignatius, the guide, within the set amount of time that any given individual has put aside for retreat.

A second remarkable feature is how the individual meditations revolve around, and centre on, the traditional Christian conception of ‘the three faculties’ of the soul: the memory, the understanding, and the will.⁴⁷ Hatfield helpfully sums up the function of each: the memory, ‘including imagination, is used to contemplate various subject matters, such as original sin, hell, or the passion of Christ’; the understanding ‘draws implications on the object lesson’. All this is done ‘with the end of raising affections in the will ... and strengthening its resolve.’⁴⁸

The employment of the three faculties of the soul are reflected in the structure of the individual meditations in the *Spiritual Exercises*; each ‘exercise’ opens with a ‘preparatory prayer’ and a number of ‘preludes’ (thereby using the faculty of the memory for ‘mental re-creation’), progresses into a number of ‘points’ (thereby employing the faculty of understanding), and culminates in a ‘colloquy’ (using the faculty of the will) to express a changing and redirection of the will from start to

⁴⁴ Beck, 31

⁴⁵ Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises* [64], 23

⁴⁶ Ignatius, ‘Eighteenth Annotation’, *Spiritual Exercises* [18] 8

⁴⁷ G. Hatfield, ‘The Senses and the Fleshless Eye’, in A. Oksenberg Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Descartes’ Meditations* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1986), 48

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 48

finish. Ignatius instructs that sometimes the colloquy will ‘be like the conversation of a friend with a friend, or of a servant with his lord’,⁴⁹ and at other times, it will take the form of unfettered praise and thanksgiving:⁵⁰ the content is very much dependent on the theme of the individual meditation.

The third distinctive feature is that the *Spiritual Exercises* are strongly imagistic. They have a particular emphasis on the imagistic representation of biblical episodes, enabling something of a ‘dramatisation’ of the meditational state. A prime example of this feature is the First Exercise of the First Week; the meditation opens by the instruction to bring about

A certain mental re-creation of the place. It should be observed in this regard that during any meditation or contemplation of a corporal entity, for example of Christ, we shall see with a sort of imaginary vision a physical place representing what we are contemplating, for instance a temple or a mountain where we could find Christ Jesus or the Virgin Mary, and everything else that is related to the theme of our contemplation.⁵¹

Directly related to the theme, this technique of mental imaging ensures that the faculty of the memory is employed; the ‘mental re-creation’ enables the meditator to engage their imagination by visualising a scene and thereby wholly connect with the theme. However, whilst the Ignatian meditation actively employs the use of images, as central to his method, Descartes unreservedly scorns their illusory nature. Such differences will inform how we assess the relationship between the two writers.

This is not an exhaustive account of the features that characterise Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*, but it highlights some important ones. This is particularly

⁴⁹ Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises* [54], 20

⁵⁰ An example of this can be found in Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises* [60], 22

⁵¹ Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises* [47], 18

because they will assume significance, in terms of shedding light on the nature and extent of Descartes' indebtedness to Ignatius.

This section has asked the question of how Descartes would have been aware of, and indeed familiar with, Ignatius' key text, the *Spiritual Exercises*, by looking at Descartes' Jesuit education, as a formative experience. It also introduced the character of Ignatius, and noted some central features of the *Spiritual Exercises*, which will be important considerations as the thesis progresses. I can conclude that the connection between the two writers is well-founded, and therefore a valid area of exploration in assessing the literary character of Descartes' *Meditations*. Having used historical and biographical considerations to establish a basic connection, the question we now need to ask, therefore, is how are we to begin to understand the relationship between the two meditators and their respective 'meditations'?

Overstating the Ignatian-Cartesian Connection

Having established a basic historical-biographical connection between Ignatius and Descartes, we now move on to the second section of this chapter, which will be concerned with beginning to assess the nature and extent of the connection between the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Meditations*. By approaching the issue from a negative angle, in this section I will be putting the spotlight on the problems created by overstating the connection between the two texts.

Vendler's interpretation, I will argue, provides an example of how the overstatement of the Ignatian-Cartesian connection leads to the danger of misrepresentation of the texts.⁵² Vendler argues for a close connection between the Ignatian meditation and Descartes' *Meditations*, claiming that Loyola's influence on

⁵² Vendler

the *Meditations* is ‘not just a matter of some similarities, but of basic conception, aim, strategy, and literary form.’⁵³ As will become increasingly clear in the course of this thesis, I agree with Vendler’s general assessment of the Ignatian influence on the *Meditations* – that ‘the discovery of the Ignatian background of the *Meditations* ceases to be of mere historical interest.’⁵⁴ – and I think that he draws attention to an important aspect of how we read Descartes’ work, that ‘it has important consequences for the philosophical understanding of Descartes’ principal work.’⁵⁵

However, I claim that the way in which Vendler expounds the Ignatian-Cartesian connection is misguided, and demonstrates too heavy a reliance on the Ignatian connection to inform his reading of the *Meditations*. The crux of the issue is encapsulated by Beck: ‘the contents of the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Meditations* are obviously different, nor is the final aim of the saint and the philosopher the same.’⁵⁶

Vendler’s study centres on the drawing of five broad parallels between Descartes’ *Meditations* and Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*. The first of these claims argues that ‘the structure and some of the basic moves of the first four Cartesian meditations conform to Loyola’s scheme for a meditation.’⁵⁷ Secondly, Vendler holds that the end goal of the *Meditations* is ‘not merely to convince the reader of the truth of certain propositions,’⁵⁸ but to effect a change of *will*. I agree with this proposition, and will develop this argument later on in the thesis. The third parallel drawn concerns the ‘choice’ at the end of the Fourth Meditation which constitutes the “climax” of Descartes’ text. Once again, I hold this view to be valid, and concurrent with Ignatius’ parallel emphasis on ‘choice’ in the *Exercises*. Fourthly, Vendler claims that Descartes’ creation of the demon and wax hypotheses are rooted in the

⁵³ Ibid., 195

⁵⁴ Ibid., 195

⁵⁵ Ibid., 195

⁵⁶ Beck, 31

⁵⁷ Vendler, 195

⁵⁸ Ibid., 195

employment of Ignatius' mantra of '*age contra!* (go against!)',⁵⁹ to act as 'a counterweight to our inordinate inclination[s].'⁶⁰

The final broad parallel drawn by Vendler concerns how we view the *Meditations*; as akin to Ignatius' *Exercises*, Vendler argues that Descartes' *Meditations* is the way by which Descartes 'fulfil[s] his mission in life', due to the 'mystical experience-dream-pilgrimage-period of solitude' pattern 'mirrored' by Ignatius.⁶¹ Essentially, I agree that this basic Ignatian pattern forms a parallel that is difficult to overlook – indeed, I have outlined these autobiographical similarities earlier in this chapter – but, as I am constantly keen to stress, I believe that the way in which each writer perceived their respective project, is fundamentally divergent. Whilst God arguably forms the centre of the Cartesian system in *Meditations* (though clearly this is dependent on how we view issues of apparent circularity, as will be discussed later on), and Descartes appears eager to emphasise his loyalty to the established ecclesiastical authority of his day, I am reluctant to accept the thesis that Descartes' *Meditations* is a devotional piece, especially not in the 'Ignatian' sense. Indeed, in its crudest and most basically sketched form, it could be said that the difference in project between the two writers is thus: Ignatius, in his meditational *Exercises*, aims to produce a prescriptive handbook of orthodox spirituality; it is a devotional piece. Descartes', conversely, is challenging the universally accepted norm, – the 'preconceived opinions'⁶² – embarking on the project of 'deal[ing] with the foundations of First Philosophy in its entirety.'⁶³ While aspects of his work may be 'devotional', in some sense, his aim of pure reflection and devotion is clearly not aligned with that of Ignatius.

Thus, some qualification is called for. My discussion of Vendler's presentation of apparent Ignatian-Cartesian parallels will focus on the following questionable points, in order to illustrate that Vendler's approach is misguided, as it exaggerates the

⁵⁹ Ibid., 196

⁶⁰ Ibid., 196

⁶¹ Ibid., 196

⁶² Descartes, 'Preface to the Reader', *Meditations*, 8

⁶³ Ibid., 8

connection between the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Meditations*. I will refute, firstly, Vendler's claim that the *Meditations*, like the *Spiritual Exercises*, is prescriptive; and secondly, his claim that the 'days' of the *Meditations* are parallel to the 'weeks' of the *Exercises*. Furthermore, I will hone in on a few specific aspects within these points, which, I believe, need to be subjected to closer scrutiny. It is these in particular which are of concern to me, in my attempt to form a picture of what the connection between the two writers looks like.

By highlighting these two particular aspects of Vendler's argument, I will use them as a springboard into examining why such paralleling of structure, form, tone and content is problematic; simply put, why it is not tenable to paint this picture of the textual connection. I will consider in turn the issues of 'prescription' and the presentation of 'time' in the two texts. It is vital to note that this analysis is not intended to dismiss a connection entirely – indeed, quite the converse; I suggest that acknowledging a connection between the Ignatian meditational tradition and Descartes' *Meditations* is central to our understanding of his work – but rather to think about how to make such comparisons fruitful, to inform how we view the text as whole. However, to overstate the connection is to approach the complex issue in a misguided way.

In this section of the chapter, therefore, I focus on the aspects of Vendler's analysis that do not stand up to scrutiny. The (dual) aim is to show how the temptation to overstate the connection between Descartes' *Meditations* and the Ignatian *Exercises* is, firstly, based on some fundamental misapprehensions of Descartes' project; and, secondly, can lead to a misrepresentation of the relationship between the two writers. I hope to be more roundly representative of Vendler's article when exploring possible reasons for Descartes' choice of the meditational genre, later in this thesis. For now, I will use what I see as central errors in Vendler's article to illustrate where scholars on one end of the Ignatian-Cartesian relationship spectrum go wrong.

The Problem of Prescriptivism

Vendler claims that ‘Descartes views the *Meditations* not just as a text to be read and understood, but as a prescription for mental exercises to be performed by the reader.’⁶⁴ I firmly believe, along with Vendler, that the *Meditations* are not just a text to be read, but rather an exercise to be performed. However, I object to Vendler’s specific claim that Descartes’ text is *prescriptive*.

Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* are clearly prescriptive; as aforementioned, they are set out as a devotional manual, clearly and purposefully structured, to be used as a sort of ‘handbook’ on spiritual retreats. This clear purpose explains the instructive tone that characterises the work; the retreatant is given a set amount of time to work through the exercises laid out by Ignatius, with every moment accounted for. Whilst it can be adapted for the needs of different types of people, the basic instruction is the same. The exercises are to be followed closely and faithfully, in order to reach the (uncompromising) goal of a change of will and, thereby, outlook and lifestyle. This prescriptive tone which arguably characterises the *Exercises* often serves to render the text rather rigid.

At the outset of each exercise, for example, Ignatius sets out what topic will be covered, and in what way; as an illustration of this observation, the Second Exercise of the First Week is presented as ‘a meditation about sins that, with the preparatory prayer and two preludes, includes five articles or points, and a colloquy at the end.’⁶⁵ What is required for the preparatory prayer, and then the two preludes, is stated (the first prelude being, in this case, a ‘mental re-creation’ of a place, followed by the second, ‘made by asking for what we are looking for here’). (As an aside, it must be noted at this point that I am not disputing that the individual meditations in Descartes’ *Meditations* evidence affinity with these *Spiritual Exercises*; now, I am simply pressing the point that Ignatius’ *Exercises* are, to some

⁶⁴ Vendler, 198

⁶⁵ Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises*, [55], 21

extent at least, characterised by their prescriptive nature, as evidenced in the structure of the particular exercises). With constant precision, the content of each ‘point’ is detailed in the same instructive manner as the preparatory prayer and the two preludes. Finally, the content and nature of the ‘colloquy’ is spelt out, often using the instruction, ‘the characteristic of the colloquy is to be like...’,⁶⁶ the detail depending on the theme of the individual exercise. For example, for the First Exercise of the First Week, Ignatius prescribes that

The colloquy will be made by imagining Jesus Christ in front of me, attached to the cross. Then I should look within myself for the reason why the infinite Creator Himself became a creature, and deemed it worthy to come from life eternal to a temporal death for my sins ... furthermore, the characteristic of the colloquy is to be like the conversation of a friend with a friend, or of a servant with his lord ... at the end, the Our Father will be said.⁶⁷

There appears to be little room for free expression, even in the colloquy, which is the expression of praise which the meditation culminates in. I find this contrasts dramatically with the colloquies found in the *Meditations*. As will be later discussed, the basic structure of the individual meditations in Descartes’ text can be, at least loosely, paralleled with the Ignatian meditational pattern, for the individual exercises in his spiritual manual. However, if, as emulative of the Ignatian meditational order, Descartes’ individual meditations end in a colloquy, of sorts, then I cannot see much affinity between them. Vendler claims, for example, that the colloquy at the end of the Third Meditation⁶⁸ is ‘his most beautiful Colloquy: one that could have been written by St. Ignatius himself.’⁶⁹ I have to disagree with Vendler’s assessment here, regarding the colloquies in the two respective works. Yes, Ignatius instructs the retreatant to conclude each exercise in a colloquy of reflection and praise; and yes, the first four of Descartes’ meditations, at least, end in

⁶⁶ Ibid. [54], 20

⁶⁷ Ibid. [53-54], 20

⁶⁸ See Descartes, ‘Third Meditation’, *Meditations*, 36

⁶⁹ Vendler, p. 208

something which resembles a colloquy. However, the key difference between the two texts, in this respect, is the tone of their respective colloquies.

Descartes' colloquies appear as considered, yet natural-seeming, periods of reflection, forming a neat way of ending one meditation, and setting the scene effectively for the next. These colloquies, besides their structural role, have literary impact; their tone varies from one meditation to the next, depending on what reflections he has on the day just passed (the colloquy ending the First Meditation, for example, is all doom and gloom – in 'fear that [his] peaceful sleep may be followed by hard labour when I wake, and that I shall have to toil not in the light, but amid the inextricable darkness of the problems I have now raised'⁷⁰ – whereas the colloquy ending the Second Meditation is focused on the need to engrain the lessons of the day 'more deeply in [the] memory').⁷¹ The ending of the Third Meditation is particularly worthy of mention for our purposes. Widely perceived as the 'epiphany' of the *Meditations*, this colloquy acts as the culmination of the strenuous efforts of the first three meditations; what has been established now leads Descartes to

Pause ... and spend some time in the contemplation of God; to reflect on his attributes, and to gaze with wonder and adoration on the beauty of this immense light, so far as the eye of my darkened intellect can bear it.⁷²

This experience is clearly a deeply personal one, and Descartes does not hold back in his praise-filled contemplation of the God he holds to be at the centre of his – necessarily unified – system. Descartes is not self-consciously prescribing to his reader how they *should* or *will necessarily* react to the establishment of key arguments that Descartes feels he has put forward convincingly, culminating in this point of epiphany; rather, he seems to be anticipating that such a reaction to this situation might take the form of a colloquy of praise and adoration. Where Ignatius actively instructs his retreatant in how to respond according to the development of

⁷⁰ Descartes, 'First Meditation', *Meditations*, 15

⁷¹ Ibid., 'Second Meditation', 23

⁷² Ibid., 'Third Meditation', 36

the meditation, Descartes is recounting a personal experience, in personal terms, in relation to the whole text. When his reader chooses to ‘meditate with [him]’, he is conceiving his quest in terms of following Descartes’ personal journey, and – Descartes hopes – reaching similar ecstatic conclusions. Furthermore, the reader cannot help but feel involved in the experience, due to the supreme eloquence of the colloquy, particularly as it gains much of its – both literary and philosophical – impact from its relation to the meditations preceding it, and from the speculation of what will follow from it.

When compared to this free-flowing expression of enlightenment on Descartes’ part, Ignatius’ colloquies appear rather contrived. As the work of the first three meditations can be viewed as culminating in this highly emotionally charged moment, its drama assumes even more effect. Ignatius’ colloquies, however, are relatively standardised from the start, and therefore seem to lack the impact of Descartes’ ‘moment of enlightenment’ at the end of the Third Meditation. Towards the end of one particular exercise, Ignatius writes:

I should burst out in an exclamation, due to a vehement commotion of emotions, wondering deeply at how all creatures (mentioning each singularly) have sustained me for so long and have kept me alive until this exact moment...⁷³

While there appears to be a close textual affinity between this part of the *Exercises* and the culmination of the Third Meditation in *Meditations* – both display an intense and dramatic expression of praise, in fulsome language – what sets them apart is that Descartes’ colloquy has a quality of spontaneity that Ignatius’ seems to lack. The fact that he has instructed his reader to react in this way, to mark the culmination of the particular exercise, prevents it from having the natural occurrence and highly personal character of Descartes’ moment of discovery and subsequent free-flowing praise.

⁷³ Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises* [60], 22

Furthermore, although these meditational exercises are rooted deeply in the saint's personal experience (as discussed earlier in this chapter), the prescriptive tone which characterises each exercise results in one getting the impression that the instructive element triumphs over any personal expression of enlightenment. If the retreatant is told exactly what their reaction to this exercise must be, and therefore how the colloquy should look, it rather detracts, somewhat ironically, from the individual reflection and praise element that is integral to the exercise.

I think that, presented with this comparison, de Blacam's exploration of the Ignatian motivation will prove illuminating.⁷⁴ de Blacam notes 'the soldierly austerity of his writing',⁷⁵ suggesting that the commanding tone, communicating clearly the essentials of the exercise, derives from Ignatius' military background (we recall that the *Spiritual Exercises* were written by Ignatius during a time of recovery from an injury sustained in military service⁷⁶). The *Spiritual Exercises* thereby represent 'the work of a man of action turning to the battles of the soul.'⁷⁷ de Blacam extends this analogy; in Ignatius' assuming authority, the clearly prescriptive tone which Ignatius employs can be paralleled to something of a 'military style', such that the text is 'a volume of standing orders for a spiritual army.'⁷⁸ This is a helpful way to view the prescriptive tone we encounter in the *Spiritual Exercises*, because not only does it bring in the historical-biographical threads of Ignatius' story, but it also paints a picture of how Ignatius himself might have understood his transition from soldier to saint: the expression of this transformation of role is expressed in effective literary form in his meditational work.

Consistently expressing his instructions with clarity and minimal rhetorical flourish, the one performing the exercises is left in no doubt of the nature, theme and

⁷⁴ A. de Blacam, 'The Soul of a Soldier: A Study of St. Ignatius as Author', *The Irish Monthly*, Vol. 69, No. 821 (Nov., 1941), 542-551

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20514948> (12/10/2011)

⁷⁵ Ibid., 548

⁷⁶ P. Wolff, 'Preface', in Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises*, viii

⁷⁷ de Blacam, 548

⁷⁸ Ibid., 545

itinerary of the task ahead of them, in each individual meditation, which, together, comprise the *Spiritual Exercises* as the handbook. I would agree with de Blacam's assessment that

The plan of meditation of each "Exercise" reads like the *orders of the day*, or the orders for an action, written by a commanding officer for his well-disciplined men to follow out. All has been considered and planned, to the last detail, and what is to be done set forth with the minimum of words.⁷⁹

Descartes, too, was a soldier – firstly, in the army of the Netherlands; and later, in the army of the Catholic League, in the Thirty Years War,⁸⁰ a 'critical period in his life'⁸¹ – but whatever the similarities in their military backgrounds, the soldierly tone struck by Ignatius is anything but imitated by Descartes (although it would seem that Descartes' thought thrived under military conditions⁸²). Descartes' text, I would argue, is quite the contrary; it has a fluidity and a dynamism that Ignatius' lacks. The narrative form of the *Meditations*, in stark contrast to the list of instructions which constitutes the *Spiritual Exercises*, gives the meditation what Flood calls 'formal dynamism'.⁸³ Flood helpfully notes that

What commentaries ... typically neglect to report is the fact that these arguments are knit together by a narrative synthesis without which the *Meditations* would be a fragmentary, unsuccessful pastiche of discrete arguments.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Ibid., 547-548

⁸⁰ R.E. Langer, 'Rene Descartes', *The American Mathematical Monthly*, Vol. 44, No. 8 (Oct., 1937) 500

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2301226> (13/06/2012)

⁸¹ B.F. Finkel, 'Biography: Rene Descartes', *The American Mathematical Monthly*, Vol. 5, No. 8/9 (Aug.-Sep., 1898), 193

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2969353> (13/06/2012)

⁸² Langer: 'Though Descartes later professed himself to have been repelled by much of the rawness of soldiers' deportment, and though he deprecated much that he experienced in army life, he nevertheless, and paradoxically enough, found in the army an excellent environment for his intellectual work.' (500)

⁸³ Flood, 849

⁸⁴ Ibid., 851

This integral holistic aspect will be explored further in the next chapter; for now, it is sufficient to note that an appreciation of the narrative dimension of the *Meditations* should inform how we view its relationship to the Ignatian style of meditation, with its stark, prescriptive presentation.

Not only does it arguably rely on this dynamism for its very coherence, it also bestows on the text a lack of prescription; the form is, by its very nature, looser than that of Ignatius' exercises, and because it is not presented as a treatise or list of propositions, it resists prescription by virtue of its fluidity and lack of commanding tone. Furthermore, this idea goes full circle; I would hazard to suggest that this dynamism is due to the lack of prescription; his aim is not to *prescribe*, but to *describe*, doing so in the hope that selective readers will have the tenacity, willing and natural intellectual curiosity to follow and discover his conclusions for themselves.

This leads us on to an important area of consideration in examining how the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Meditations* relate to each other. It seems to me that whether either text is prescriptive, or not, in tone, is linked to the aspect of accessibility that further widens the gulf between Ignatius and Descartes. Vendler writes that 'Ignatius insists that the full Exercises are not for everyone';⁸⁵ however, as we noted earlier, Ignatius permits – indeed, suggests – the adaptation of his meditational exercises to meet individual retreatants' various situations. In his 'Annotations', Ignatius clearly states that

The *Exercises* must be adapted to the condition of the person who is making them, for example, according to his age, his education, and his aptitude, in order not to demands from someone who is uneducated, of weak spirit, or in poor health more than what he can handle without inconvenience and can assume for his profit.

⁸⁵ Vendler, 200

Equally, just as anyone becomes interiorly better disposed, that which will help him the most must be offered to him.⁸⁶

Ignatius goes on to say:

Likewise, if he who gives the Exercises sees that someone is of a feeble nature and limited in his capacities, so that only mediocre progress and fruits could be expected from him, then it would be more than enough to prescribe to this one some of the above lighter Exercises...⁸⁷

I quote Ignatius at length here because this passage encapsulates Ignatius' attitude towards his readers; his standards are high, and he expects strong individual effort, but it appears to be enough that a prospective meditator is willing and dedicated, regardless of their intellectual standings, among other factors. Descartes, conversely, does not appear to suffer fools gladly. As expressed in his 'Preface to the Reader', his standards are uncompromising:

The judgement of many people is so silly and weak that, once they have accepted a view, they continue to believe it, however false and irrational it may be ... I do not expect any popular approval or indeed any great crowd of readers. On the contrary I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously with me, and to withdraw their minds from all preconceived opinions. Such readers, as I well know, are few and far between.⁸⁸

This mark of exclusivity which defines the *Meditations* from the outset may shed light on why Descartes' text does not assume a prescriptive form or tone. If Ignatius is pitching his Exercises to an audience of varying intellectual levels, education, health, and so on, then the prescriptive tone of his exercises assumes vital

⁸⁶ Ignatius, 'Eighteenth Annotation', *Spiritual Exercises* [18], 8

⁸⁷ Ibid. [18], 8

⁸⁸ Descartes, 'Preface to the Reader', in *Meditations*, 8

importance; his *Spiritual Exercises* are universally accessible, and so need to be easily accessed by way of form as well. Acting as this ‘commanding officer’,⁸⁹ Ignatius presents his readers with a clear itinerary to follow, and a pattern to emulate. Since Descartes from the outset specifies the type of reader he expects to follow him – an elite class of intellectually driven individuals – his role of guide is one of description, not of instruction; he relies on their already-existing and already-equal level of intellectual commitment and ability to follow him, and find for themselves the truths which lie innate in the human mind.

It has become clear, therefore, that to parallel the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Meditations* on the basis of a shared tone of prescription is misguided. Obviously keen to resist presenting his ideas as a treatise, or a list of propositions, Descartes’ use of narrative dynamism, and the apparent free-flowing spontaneity of his colloquies, are in stark contrast to the rigidity of the Ignatian meditational form. Essentially, Ignatius’ exercises take the form of a prescription, with their commanding, instructive tone, whereas Descartes gives us something looser and less prescriptive to work with. Furthermore, it was noted that the issue of prescription is linked to that of accessibility; both writers employ different levels of prescription in order to convey their project in different ways, depending on who is the anticipated audience. The prescription – and lack of – thus takes on a literary function, and the writers use it to very different ends.

The Structural Parallels, Regarding Time

A second parallel I wish to pick up on is Vendler’s alignment of the use of time in the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Meditations*. Vendler states that ‘like the *Exercises*, the *Meditations* are divided into ‘days’’⁹⁰; furthermore, he argues that the ‘days’ in the *Meditations* parallel the ‘weeks’ of the *Spiritual Exercises*. My concerns with this alignment – which Vendler says is ‘a superficial but very telling

⁸⁹ de Blacam, 547-548

⁹⁰ Vendler, 200

similarity'⁹¹ – are twofold; firstly, it is not completely clear that Descartes does divide his *Meditations* into literal 'days', and secondly, even if he does, I argue that it is done to very different effect to what Ignatius intended in the *Spiritual Exercises*. Essentially, the reader could interpret the 'days' in the *Meditations* rigidly, as denoting literal days, but I suggest that to interpret the days thus is to miss an important deeper – and subtler – element at work in Descartes' text.

Firstly, then, I do not think that Descartes 'very clearly, and very explicitly' allots days to the *Meditations*, in any literal sense at least. Superficially, the evidence does indeed point to Descartes envisioning 'days' as the providers of structure in the text, denoting individual meditations. Vendler details the references to 'days' in the *Meditations* – the 'pertinent passages'⁹² – and he rightly notes that this *suggests* the existence of 'days' in the work, like in Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*. It is therefore fitting to briefly outline, like Vendler,⁹³ these key points of reference.

The First Meditation refers to a 'today', in which Descartes has 'expressly rid [his] mind of all worries and arranged for [him]self a clear stretch of free time.'⁹⁴ The ending of this first meditation suggests the end of a day, with references to 'sleep'; with this nod to night time, Descartes expresses, as the culmination of a day's doubting of his previously established opinions, a

Fear that [his] peaceful sleep may be followed by hard labour when [he] wake[s], and that [he] shall have to toil not in the light, but amid the inextricable darkness of the problems [he] ha[s] now raised.⁹⁵

In a similar fashion, the Second Meditation opens with a reference to 'yesterday's meditation', as an expression of despair – 'I can neither put [those

⁹¹ Vendler, 200

⁹² Ibid., 200

⁹³ Ibid., 201

⁹⁴ Descartes, 'First Meditation', *Meditations*, 12

⁹⁵ Ibid., 15

doubts] out of my mind nor see any way of resolving them’ – yet also one of resolve: ‘nevertheless I will make an effort and once more attempt the same path which I started on yesterday’.⁹⁶ The start of the Fourth Meditation refers to ‘these past few days’,⁹⁷ in order to summarise what has been explored, and established up until this point; ‘today’s meditation’ ends with a reflection on what has been established in this fourth ‘day’.⁹⁸ ‘A few days ago’,⁹⁹ which features in the opening paragraph of the Fifth Meditation, is used as a way of casting the mind back to the original doubts which constituted the first meditation, and from that, looking forward to see what progress can now be made from this current point: to ‘see whether any certainty can be achieved regarding material objects.’¹⁰⁰ Once again, the Sixth Meditation makes reference to ‘the last few days’, whereby the ‘exaggerated doubts ... should be dismissed as laughable’ because of what has been established as solid by Descartes’ process of meditative reasoning.¹⁰¹

It will not escape one’s notice that there appears to be no explicit reference to time – in the form explicated above – in the Third Meditation. This is telling; if the use of ‘days’ in the *Meditations* is to be aligned with that in the *Spiritual Exercises*, surely consistency is needed, in order for a parallel to be drawn. While it is tempting to draw a parallel on the basis of five out of the six meditations referring to ‘days’, the absence of time references in the third meditation preclude this parallel from constituting a valid ground on which to build a connection between the structural elements of the two texts. Furthermore, Descartes does not say anything explicitly about the presence of days; unlike the Ignatian form, Descartes does not entitle the individual meditations ‘Day One...Day Two...Day Three’, and so on. The examples given above are just vague references to time from which a pattern of ‘days’ could be inferred. I am not denying that the evidence points to some sort of day-defined structure of the *Meditations*; I simply dispute that it is enough to constitute a textual connection. The parallel drawn by Vendler, in an attempt to emphasise the influence of the *Spiritual Exercises* on the *Meditations*, is neither consistent nor extensive

⁹⁶ Ibid., ‘Second Meditation’, 16

⁹⁷ Ibid., ‘Fourth Meditation’, 37

⁹⁸ Ibid., 43

⁹⁹ Ibid., ‘Fifth Meditation’, 44

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 44

¹⁰¹ Ibid., ‘Sixth Meditation’, 61

enough to constitute a substantial alignment of the two texts. I would suggest that if Descartes intended his *Meditations* to be defined by individual days, then he probably would have made explicit mention of it at some point; or at least made sure that the pattern of days was followed by, and evidenced in, each individual meditation. While Ignatius divides his *Spiritual Exercises* into weeks, into clear sections of time—forming, arguably, the heart of his system – by making constant reference to ‘weeks’, and entitling each week ‘First Week ... Second Week ... Third Week...’ and so on, Descartes’ text lacks these explicit points of reference by which one could suggest that he intends to be purely literal when talking about time.

I would suggest that this lack of extensive parallels regarding the time frame of the *Meditations*, and that of the *Spiritual Exercises*, shows that any division of the *Meditations* into days, whilst arguably identifiable through the other five meditations, is not of central importance to our understanding of the text. What is becoming clear is that time is used more for literary purposes than acting as references to time-specific happenings. My claim is that the ‘days’ suggested in the *Meditations* do not exist to be taken literally, but rather to constitute a stylistic feature and a literary device.

Secondly, therefore, I do not think it really matters whether Descartes intends his ‘days’ to be taken literally, as he uses his hints at time to very different effect to Ignatius’ attitude towards time in the *Spiritual Exercises*. I agree with Beck that, in the *Meditations*, the ‘diurnal division is ... fundamentally a literary device’.¹⁰²

Because of the specificity, rigidity and prescriptive nature of the *Spiritual Exercises*, I suggest that the clear division of the exercises into days and weeks are necessary for the project. Ignatius’ text is, as we noted earlier, highly structured; he needs this set sequence and time frame in order to prescribe clearly to his followers. The ‘weeks’ give the whole exercise its structure, as they determine both the theme of the meditation (for example, the First Week centres around the ‘Consideration of

¹⁰² Beck, 32

Sins'; the Second focuses on the 'Life of Jesus Christ'; the Third on 'the Passion', and the Fourth and final week revolves around the 'Resurrection and Ascension'),¹⁰³ and how the exercises might be adapted for the variety of retreatants Ignatius anticipates. Ignatius does mention that 'although these four parts are called Weeks, they do not necessarily have to be seven or eight days long';¹⁰⁴ my point, therefore, is not that we should understand the whole exercise to last a month (in contrast to the loose sense of time I have identified in the *Meditations*), but rather that the use of 'weeks' and 'days' in the *Spiritual Exercises* determine the structure and form, and allow it to be the closely guided – indeed, prescriptive – meditational handbook that it is. Essentially, Ignatius has a need for specific timings to guide the text – even if slight deviation, according to personal situation, is permitted – in a way that Descartes has not. Indeed, we could look to Descartes' own experience of the Ignatian retreat to inform this point; it seems that the retreat participated in while at La Flèche lasted only a week. The exercises are therefore adapted to fit within the specified time restraints of Holy Week; the detailed structure of these exercises owes its coherence to the time frame set in place in relation to the whole programme of exercises. The whole point of the *Spiritual Exercises* being the way they are, I would argue, is that the retreatant is provided with a clear guide, working through a set itinerary, dependent on days and weeks, albeit flexible within these guiding parameters.

Descartes' work, on the other hand, as aforementioned, alludes more loosely to a series of 'days' in the *Meditations*. The point deriving from this is that the references to time interspersed throughout text, and the division of the text into individual 'meditations', have a primarily literary function; any literal interpretation, while arguably valid, is not centrally relevant to his task.

No one, of course, supposes that there necessarily passed twenty-four hours between the time of Descartes' writing one meditation and his writing the next; we wouldn't be in the least surprised to discover that the Second Meditation had been written

¹⁰³ Ignatius, 'Fourth Annotation', *Spiritual Exercises*, [4], 4

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., [4], 4

immediately upon the heels of the First, or that five weeks had passed between the times of their writing. “Yesterday” is not deictic with reference to any time of writing.¹⁰⁵

Without wishing to divert the course of this discussion by considering, as Kosman does, the ‘fictional’ element of the *Meditations*, I wish to use Kosman’s comment on time to inform our understanding of what Descartes means by his suggestion of ‘days’ in the text.¹⁰⁶ Rather than a literal representation of the ‘days’ of Descartes’ personal meditational experience, or a prescription for others, it seems that Descartes’ references concern a general sense of continuity. As noted above, the lack of specific reference to particular ‘days’ is made up for, as it were, with other, vaguer, references to time, such as ‘today’, ‘yesterday’, and so on. It has been established that these references are insufficient to align the texts of the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Meditations*; now it remains to be established what function these references do fulfil.

It is clear from the outset that Descartes is not looking to write a devotional manual of spirituality, but the grounding of a new metaphysics. The functions of the references to time are literary devices which also hold, I believe, philosophical significance. It is a cleverly conjured bit of technique from Descartes that he might loosely employ an element of Ignatian meditation, and use it to his purposes; the expounding of his philosophical ideas. I will explore this further by suggesting that there are two – interrelating and interactive – functions of the allusions to time in the *Meditations*: firstly, the provision of clarity and lucidity of presentation. The division of the *Meditations* into individual meditations – done so by the hinting at ‘days’ in the text – ensures that the reader can easily identify where they are in the exercise, and is provided with natural breaks, so as to reflect on a theme before continuing on to the next meditation. The second function is the provision of continuity and

¹⁰⁵ L. Ayreh Kosman, ‘The Naïve Narrator: Meditation in Descartes’ *Meditations*’, in A. Oksenberg Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Descartes’ Meditations* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press), 31

¹⁰⁶ For a discussion of the possible “fictional” element of the *Meditations*, and the effect this has on how we view the author/narrator interaction, see Kosman, 21-43

cohesiveness in the text as a reflection of Descartes' project. It is this second function that I want to explore in more depth.

The allusions to time imbue the *Meditations* with a sense of both continuity and cohesiveness. By giving the impression of a succession of days, a continuity of project is created; in 'today's' meditation, Descartes reflects and builds on the work of the meditation of 'yesterday', in order to ensure the cumulative nature of the project. By conveying to the reader in this way that progress has been made, Descartes ensures a sense of continuity, and thereby ensures the communication of a cumulative argument. Indeed, this idea of the building of an argument, created by the literary device of ensuring continuity within the text and between the individual meditations, mirrors – and thereby simultaneously expresses – the building of the 'edifice'. Descartes' statement at the opening of the First Meditation, regarding the need 'to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations' in order to find a sure basis for knowledge,¹⁰⁷ uses the imagery of an edifice to enable the reader – and probably also Descartes himself – to visualise the need for a sure foundation of knowledge on which to build, in order to create a systematic presentation of the sciences. The constant cross-references made between the individual meditations serve, firstly, as a reminder to the reader that Descartes' system-building is cumulative process, requiring strong continuity between the different elements; and secondly, as a way of ensuring that the reader is following in the steps of Descartes, and treating the project as necessarily cumulative. Thus, continuity is provided through Descartes' playing with the idea of time. For example, Descartes' declaration that 'nevertheless [he] will make an effort and once more attempt the same path which [he] started on yesterday' – is a way of establishing continuity, employing the metaphor of following a path. Time is here used as a literary device to enable progression, and to carry the reader with him. As a guide, Descartes carries his reader with him on this journey of progression, ensuring that the continuity provided by the references to time gives the text a momentum, increasing both its natural propulsion – as a meditational process – and the force of his project to persuade and convince.

¹⁰⁷ Descartes, 'First Meditation', *Meditations*, 12

Foundationalism and Coherentism in the *Meditations*

Furthermore, the continuity provided by the allusion to ‘days’ in the *Meditations* also bestows on the text a sense of cohesiveness. By the very nature of the work, if the individual meditations were presented as separate parts, with no indication as to how the constituent elements interact or build on each other, I think Descartes’ system would lack coherence. It requires something to guarantee that the system is held together and is progressing in a cumulative way. Alluding to elements of time in the text prevents fragmentation. This is especially important in light of Descartes’ unstinting emphasis on the unification of themes within his system; indeed, his whole project could be said to centre on this unification. Indeed, Descartes states in his ‘Preface to the Reader’ that ‘those who do not bother to grasp the proper order of my arguments and the connection between them, but merely try to carp at individual sentences ...will not get much benefit from reading this book.’¹⁰⁸ Descartes is here pointing to the importance of the holistic and unified nature of his text. Flood puts it well, in relation to this integral aspect of Descartes’ thought in the *Meditations*:

The intelligibility of the work as a whole, its success as a piece of philosophy, and ... its significance for Western philosophy all depend upon the unity of the *Meditations* as a narrated whole.¹⁰⁹

I am aware that I expressed above the importance of understanding the cumulative nature of the text in a foundationalist sense, and yet am now drawing on the vitally unified character of Descartes’ system. What I mean to do by this shift in emphasis is to draw attention to the shifting emphases in the *Meditations*, in terms of epistemological method: at play is a movement from a foundationalist emphasis to assuming more of a coherentist-type structure. To unpack this a little, I suggest that it

¹⁰⁸ Descartes, “Preface to the reader”, *Meditations*, 8

¹⁰⁹ Flood, 849

does not matter whether the work remains consistently foundationalist throughout, in line with what is alluded to in Descartes' statement of intent, regarding the 'edifice' of knowledge. That Descartes' intention is to 'demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all'¹¹⁰ is uncompromisingly foundationalist, serving to introduce the foundationalist scheme that would ensue. The *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* offers a helpful definition of foundationalism as an option in epistemology, as

The view that knowledge and epistemic (knowledge-relevant) justification have a two-tier structure: some instances of knowledge and justification are non-inferential, or foundational; and all other instances thereof are inferential, or non-foundational, in that they derive ultimately from foundational knowledge or justification¹¹¹

Furthermore, foundationalism 'receives an extreme formulation in Descartes' *Meditations* ... [it] requires that foundational beliefs be certain and able to guarantee the certainty of the non-foundational beliefs they support.'¹¹² Indeed, the cumulative effect created by the way in which the first few meditations hang together ensures that the foundations are laid. The first two meditations follow faithfully (and necessarily) this foundationalist scheme, with the dream argument, the demon hypothesis, and the test of the wax following each other in quick succession, each building on the conclusions of the last. However, once the *cogito* and the 'Trademark Argument' for the existence of God (of the Third Meditation) begin to interact, giving rise to the famous allegations of circularity within the acclaimed 'foundationalist' project, the foundationalist project suddenly does not seem so foundationalist after all. This could spell the end of Descartes' project at this point, if strict fidelity to foundationalism is the reader's expectation. However, on a more sympathetic reading, it could also spell the moment of transition from one epistemological option to another; because the elements of the *cogito* and the

¹¹⁰ Descartes, 'First Meditation', *Meditations*, 12

¹¹¹ 'Foundationalism', in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

www.credoreference.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/entry/cupdphil/foundationalism (02/11/2011)

¹¹² Ibid.

existence of God appear interdependent, what may actually be happening is that they evidence something of a shift towards coherentism. Coherentism can be defined as:

In epistemology, a theory of the structure of knowledge or justified beliefs according to which all beliefs representing knowledge are known or justified in virtue of their relations to other beliefs, specifically, in virtue of belonging to a coherent system of beliefs.¹¹³

I think that if we keep in mind throughout our reading that Descartes is aiming for a systematic project of unification in his establishment of First Philosophy, the hints at a shift from foundationalism to coherentism in the course of Descartes' project become more plausible. Furthermore, this will receive expression later on in the thesis, as a possible defence of the *Meditations* against the charge of circularity. Of course, Descartes would not conceive of his task exclusively in terms of these two abstract options; furthermore, he would not view them as dichotomous. Rather, at work is a shift in epistemological emphasis from the foundationalist to the coherentist.

The foundationalist project thus appears to give way to coherentism, but this does not undermine the validity of his system: not in itself, at least. As expressed above, Descartes provides an interesting fusion of foundationalism and coherentism. His project relies, in its infancy, on establishing solid foundations; later on, as the scheme grows in confidence, it comes to rely, for its comprehensiveness, on more of a coherentist system. The common conception of the difference between foundationalism and coherentism is expressed thus:

Foundationalism portrays justification as having a structure like that of a building, with certain beliefs serving as the foundations and all other beliefs supported by them. Coherentism rejects this image and pictures justification as having the

¹¹³ 'Coherentism', in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) www.credoreference.com.exphost/dur.ac.uk/entry/cupphil/coherentism (02/11/11)

structure of a raft. Justified beliefs, like the planks that make up the raft, mutually support one another.¹¹⁴

However, I find this house/raft dichotomy too crude a distinction to act as representative of the complex epistemological structure at play in the *Meditations*. On the contrary, I find the image provided by Flage and Bonnen a helpful illustration, when they talk of the existence of ‘lateral supports’ within Descartes’ system. The foundationalist ‘house’ imagery is retained, but is given something of a coherentist aspect:

Whatever else might be said about the house of knowledge built on a Cartesian foundation, the method requires that the various elements which are discovered should be systematically integrated, and that one should clearly perceive how the various elements of the epistemic structure support one another.¹¹⁵

What I have just been discussing is a very basic presentation of a complex conception of the relationship between foundationalism and coherentism within the *Meditations*. It is useful, though, if only briefly, to highlight how Descartes’ project is ‘not just a discrete set of philosophical puzzles’, but ‘an integrated structure of thought’.¹¹⁶ As such, it illustrates how a perceived dichotomy between foundationalist and coherentist epistemological systems is misguided, and misleading. That ‘historically, coherentism is the most significant alternative to foundationalism’ is important;¹¹⁷ the prevailing attitude seems to be that of pitting foundationalism and coherentism against each other. This risks shutting off a whole option in understanding Descartes’ thought sympathetically (which, of course, is a key element in this thesis), and, as will receive greater attention later on, this could

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ D.E. Flage and C.A. Bonnen, *Descartes and Method: A Search for a Method in Meditations* (London: Routledge, 1999), 7-8

¹¹⁶ J. Cottingham, *Cartesian Reflections: Essays on Descartes’ Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2008), 5-6

¹¹⁷ ‘Coherentism’ in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*

be an important part of attempting to rescue Descartes' project from fatality by circularity.

Furthermore – and to return to the theme from which we briefly diverged – the allusions to 'days' in the text act as a sort of adhesive, holding the different elements together in a single, unified system of philosophy. What I have argued through this divergence is that this technique is also reflective of the epistemological shift from foundationalism to coherentism that I see as identifiable – if rather subtle – in the text. Holding the elements together, the references to time imply an aspect of interrelatedness within the system that allows, again, for the progression of the meditational piece.

Connectives and Continuity

What is more, we would do well to look at the use of other words which Descartes uses to act as points of reference. While the references to 'days' are, ultimately, inconclusive – although we have established that they have a useful literary function – Descartes provides his reader with other references to order, so as to ensure the continuity discussed above. Using, phrases such as 'now', 'to begin with', 'next', 'at this point', 'it remains for me to consider...', and so on, Descartes provides us with constant referents, so we can keep our place. This is an important way of Descartes fulfilling the guiding function which we established earlier to be an integral feature of the Ignatian meditational form. Descartes may not be prescriptive – at least, certainly not to an Ignatian extent – but he ensures that his reader is suitably guided, and helped through the stages. It is a written piece, after all, and Descartes appears sensitive to what might be perceived as authorial responsibilities. It is these referents which bestow orderliness on the text; not in an obvious, superficial sense – like the labelling of 'days' would create – but in terms of how Descartes guides his reader. Whilst we are very much reading Descartes' text – or, more accurately, *performing those exercises* – as individual meditators, as a result of self-effort (on which Descartes places uncompromising emphasis), our very

participation on this journey at all depends on our being taken on it by a guide: the author.

The argument thereby seems to rely on what Lang calls ‘connectives’, and these connectives further reflect the structure of the argument; in this way, they bestow another dimension of coherence on the development of the project. Once more, these connectives mirror the building of the argument, emphasising the aforementioned cumulative aspect which is integral to the *Meditations*. As Lang states, ‘the order of proof is inseparable from the determination of its force’.¹¹⁸ It is these subtle literary devices – often so subtle that they could easily go unnoticed – that hold the text together, fulfilling a guiding function, providing clear referents with which to map the text, and allowing the ideas to be presented in a mutually coherent way.

Conclusion

The twofold aim of this opening chapter was, first of all, to establish a basic connection between St Ignatius of Loyola and Rene Descartes; and secondly, to demonstrate the danger of overstating the textual connection between Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* and Descartes’ *Meditations*. In doing this, it serves as an introduction to the issues at stake in considering issues of style and genre in the *Meditations*. To this end, the first part of this chapter outlined the history of meditational writing from ancient times to the sixteenth century; it introduced the writings of Ignatius, and its key features; and suggested how Descartes would have been familiar with the *Spiritual Exercises*. The second part of the chapter considered how the connection between the two texts could be misrepresented by overstatement; through a critique of Vendler’ thesis – which argues for a very close connection between the two texts – it has been established that overstating the textual connection

¹¹⁸ B. Lang, ‘Descartes and the Art of Meditation’, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1988), 23 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40237529> (17/03/2011)

is misguided. As such, the focus of the chapter moved from the historical-biographical to the literary.

However, Vendler's emphasis on the literary connection between the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Meditations* drew attention to an important point: that there does appear to be some connection between the two texts. This constitutes a central tenet of my thesis. In critiquing his claim, however, I was demonstrating that his overstatement of the connection is not helpful in determining the nature of the relationship between the texts. Drawing superficial parallels is not the most fruitful way to interpret what is already presenting itself as a subtle and complex literary connection. That there is some connection between the texts is, by now, clear; from here on, the thesis will consider the motivation for, and the nature of, this connection; and the connection with the wider meditational tradition.

Consequently, the scene is set for a more thorough investigation into the influence of the Ignatian meditational genre on the *Meditations*. The following two chapters, therefore, consider how best to appropriate the connection between the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Meditations*. As such, the next chapter will give Descartes himself a 'voice'; by examining his correspondence with his contemporaries concerning the style and structure of the *Meditations*, it will focus on what Descartes says, regarding his choice of style and genre. This will shed light on his possible motivations for favouring the meditational mode; namely, that it is a viable alternative to 'disputation', the mode of philosophical argument favoured at the time of writing. The third – and final – chapter will build upon the findings of the second chapter, and shift the emphasis from what we can derive from Descartes' and his contemporaries' findings on the text to more of a speculative reconstruction of what it might look like to read the *Meditations* as 'meditation', presenting a case for why Descartes might have *actively* chosen the meditational mode to inform and present his work; not simply as a viable alternative to other philosophical modes of argument, but as valuable and fruitful in itself.

Chapter Two: Meditation over Disputation

‘The very fact that someone braces himself to attack the truth makes him less suited to perceive it’.¹¹⁹

Introduction

In investigating the dual question of the extent to which Descartes is indebted to the Ignatian meditational genre, and his possible motivations for doing so, looking directly at what Descartes himself has to say, regarding his choice of genre, seems a good place to start. The *Objections and Replies* – intended to be read alongside the text of the *Meditations* itself – yields much fruit which is valuable to the investigation at hand; and it does so in two senses. Firstly, the sections from Descartes’ *Replies* (compiled by Mersenne¹²⁰), regarding the issue of Descartes’ choice of genre, present us with a reason in itself: that meditation is superior to, and therefore a way of shunning, disputation. This will be the concern of the first part of this chapter. Secondly, one can infer from this section of the *Replies* more information about Descartes’ attitude to genre, and his reasons for thinking thus.

This is why I wrote ‘Meditations’ rather than ‘Disputations’, as the philosophers have done, or ‘Theorems and Problems’, as the geometers would have done. In so doing I wanted to make it clear that I would have nothing to do with anyone who was not willing to join me in meditating and giving the subject attentive consideration.¹²¹

This chapter will focus directly on what Descartes has to say regarding his choice of style, using as its starting point the above quotation. What is interesting

¹¹⁹ ‘Author’s Replies to the Second Set of Objections’, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. II, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, 112

¹²⁰ Ibid., 93

¹²¹ Ibid., 112

about his comments is how the issue of style is framed not in terms of asserting the positive value of meditation for his system, but rather in terms of his attitude towards the dominant methodology of philosophy at the time of his writing. As such, his comments regarding choice of style are not concentrated on ‘meditation’ itself, but rather on the motivations for seeking an alternative. To this effect, this chapter proposes that one could read Descartes’ choice of style as an assertion of independence from the dominant modes of ‘disputation’ or ‘theorems and problems’. Therefore, it will explore his attitude towards the epistemological options available to him at the time, in terms of the dominant modes of reasoning which characterised philosophical investigation.

The chapter will open with a focus on the reasons behind Descartes’ apparent antipathy towards disputation in particular, before moving into a broader consideration of Descartes’ understanding of distinction between analytic and synthetic types of philosophical reasoning. This distinction is central to Descartes’ conception of his philosophy, but is presented in somewhat obscure terms. I will seek to clarify this obscurity, and by doing so, explore how a working interpretation of this important distinction sheds light on how Descartes intended the *Meditations* to be read.

Descartes’ attitude towards syllogistic reasoning – a stalwart of the disputation mode – and its place in his system will then be assessed. Finally, the above elements will be used to inform a case study of the *cogito*, in terms of the method of its establishment in the *Meditations*. That Descartes vehemently denies any claims that the *cogito* is formed syllogistically will prompt a consideration of why syllogism would not be a viable epistemological option. The role of ‘intuition’ (held in contrast with ‘deduction’), and the issue of the movement of knowledge from the ‘particular’ to the ‘general’, will serve as reasons to support Descartes’ insistence that syllogism is not the way by which the *cogito* is established.

The chapter will pay close attention to the primary sources of Descartes' comments on his choice of style, in order to paint a more helpful picture of what his understanding of style constitutes, and how it is expressed. I will quote Descartes extensively in this section; I think this is important, in order to reveal the subtle nuances and crucial qualifications that form his case for meditation. As aforementioned, sections from the *Replies* will be drawn upon as a key source for what Descartes himself claimed to be the reason for naming his text *Meditations*. Indeed, in understanding why Descartes sought an alternative option to the dominant modes of philosophical reasoning of the time, light is shed on the reasons why 'mediation' specifically was chosen as the style of his work. This will be the concern of the third chapter. What he understands by these different modes of reasoning is highly illuminating for our consideration of his choice of the meditational genre for his writing. The third chapter, therefore, will be concerned with constructive speculation as to why Descartes wanted to associate himself with the meditational tradition of writing. This speculative account relies on examining the subtler 'echoes'¹²² of the meditational style in the text of the *Meditations*, looking at how his use of it plays out in various ways in the text. As such, this second chapter will consider what Descartes says explicitly about style; and the next chapter will, effectively, shift from the explicit explanations to some other, more implicit, reasons.

Distaste for Disputation

To repeat the quotation above, Descartes is seen to be getting to the heart of the issue:

This is why I wrote 'Meditations' rather than 'Disputations', as the philosophers have done, or 'Theorems and Problems', as the geometers would have done. In so doing I wanted to make it clear that I would have nothing to do with anyone who

¹²² Beck, 32

was not willing to join me in meditating and giving the subject attentive consideration.¹²³

Interestingly, the striking thing about this passage is that Descartes frames his reason in terms of what he does *not* want to be perceived as, and what he does *not* wish to be associated with. Here, Descartes is making a point about disputation, rather than about meditation. The issue is thus framed in negative terms – what is wrong with disputation – rather than presented as a positive assertion of the merits of using the meditational style in itself. In time, we can glean from this some thoughts about the positive value of meditation – but let us start, as Descartes does here with meditation in the “negative” context of shunning the disputation form of philosophising.

The first thing to mention is that ‘Disputations’ are clearly presented as the dominant mode of philosophising at the time that Descartes would be writing the *Meditations*. Descartes seems keen to draw a clear distinction between his style and that of the ‘philosophers’ and ‘geometers’, and assert the superiority of the meditation over the disputation. The implication here would seem to be that disputation is not to be associated with a willing attitude, or ‘attentive consideration’. Essentially, it is portrayed as somewhat incompatible with the ‘serious’ thinking Descartes likes to refer to – and which he would like his work to be associated with. The way in which he frames the issue here, therefore, leads us to view his choice as one motivated by disfavour towards alternative modes of presentation, rather than favour towards ‘meditation’ itself. As will become clear, there is probably far more to the story than this; and I begin to argue in the latter part of this chapter that Descartes’ motivation for choosing meditation as a mode of writing is to be viewed more as a positive decision, as it was compatible with the Cartesian project. Indeed, I argue that his choice of ‘meditation’ has a vital integrity for the text.

¹²³ Descartes, ‘Author’s Replies to the Second Set of Objections’, 112

For now, though, it is important to consider why Descartes surrounds the mode of disputation in particular with negative connotations, rather than assert the positive value of meditation; and why he frames the issue in negative terms at all. The key question is, simply put, what does Descartes dislike – or distrust – about disputation as a form of reasoning? To define disputation:

A disputation identifies a specific philosophical or theological issue for discussion and provides the structure for an informed and reasoned judgment about it ... With the arguments on both sides of the question in hand, the master is then ideally positioned to deal with both the conceptual issues raised by the question and the hermeneutical problems presented by the historical tradition. Academic philosophers held disputations in their classrooms and at large university convocations, and they used the form for the literary expression of their ideas.¹²⁴

The Analytic-Synthetic Distinction

What is most relevant to our purposes here is to note that ‘disputation’, as a dominant method of philosophical reasoning at the time of Descartes’ writing, falls within the broader category of the general form of reasoning that Descartes refers to as ‘synthesis’.¹²⁵ To suggest that his work is akin to a ‘disputation’ would be to express allegiance – indeed, submission – to the synthetic mode of reasoning. Descartes draws a distinction between two forms of reasoning, analytic and synthetic, stating that

As for the method of demonstration, this divides into two varieties: the first proceeds by analysis and the second by synthesis.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ S. MacDonald and N. Kretzmann, ‘Medieval Philosophy’, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/B078> (29/11/2011)

¹²⁵ Descartes, ‘Author’s Replies to the Second Set of Objections’, 110

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 110

Although this distinction will be important in informing us as to the motivations of his disinclination towards forms of writing such as ‘Disputations’ – an example of the ‘synthetic method of writing’¹²⁷ – what must be taken into account (and borne in mind throughout this section of the chapter) is that it is difficult to find in Descartes’ writings a clear account of how he understands this distinction, beyond his favouring the analytic method. Beck offers a sympathetic view of this, suggesting that Descartes’ account of the distinction is symptomatic of a more general problem in epistemology: he comments that ‘analysis ... is a very influential word, but that does not mean that it is a very clear notion. Descartes himself uses the word loosely’.¹²⁸ While I agree with Beck’s observation, I still find it surprising that Descartes can afford to use the word ‘loosely’, considering he makes it clear that his use of analysis in the *Meditations* – as an alternative to synthesis – is of central importance for writing this work in the way that he did.

Turning to Descartes’ comments on the analytic-synthetic distinction, therefore, he describes the synthetic method as one which

Demonstrates the conclusion clearly and employs a long series of definitions, postulates, axioms, theorems and problems, so that if anyone denies one of the conclusions it can be shown at once that it is contained in what has gone before, and hence the reader, however argumentative or stubborn he may be, is compelled to give his assent.¹²⁹

The analytic method, on the other hand,

Shows the true way by which the thing in question was discovered methodically ... so that if the reader is willing to follow it and give sufficient attention to all points, he will make the thing his own and understand it just as perfectly as if he had

¹²⁷ Ibid., 112

¹²⁸ Beck, 192

¹²⁹ Descartes, ‘Author’s Replies to the Second Set of Objections’, 111

discovered it for himself ... if he fails to attend even to the smallest point, he will not see the necessity of this conclusion.¹³⁰

It is a ‘rather obscure distinction’ that Descartes presents to his reader – and, I would add, one which resists any straightforward interpretation.¹³¹ Furthermore, the helpfulness of this distinction is limited by an identifiable bias; he claims that ‘this method [synthesis] is not as satisfying as the method of analysis, nor does it engage the minds of those who are eager to learn’, and that analysis, on the contrary, ‘is the best and truest method of instruction’, without really telling his reader *why*. Consequently, perhaps we would do better to look elsewhere for an elucidation of the analytic-synthetic distinction, in terms of how it is to be understood in Descartes’ work. To draw on the twentieth-century writer Gueroult’s work on Descartes, I find his understanding of the distinction helpful. He comments that it is

Properly understood as a distinction between two *orders* of presentation, namely the order of knowledge ... and the order of being. The order of knowledge, or the analytic order, follows the order of things as they are known ... [whereas] “the order of being, or the synthetic order ... proceeds in quite a different way ... presenting things in an order that reflects the *real* dependencies that things have with respect to one another, independent of our knowledge of them.”¹³²

The lack of clarity characterising Descartes’ use of the terms ‘analysis’ and ‘synthesis’ means that our interpretation of their role in the *Meditations* must be – at least partly – speculative. What *is* clear, however, is that the distinction between

¹³⁰ Ibid., 110

¹³¹ D. Garber, *Descartes Embodied: Reading Cartesian Philosophy through Cartesian Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 54
http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=L5EVmvlfgmgC&pg=PA53&lpg=PA53&dq=descartes+and+synthesis&source=bl&ots=V9hym_pj_p&sig=gbv852pfmIHSVCExqNdxX_yq_Mc&hl=en&ei=ehDVTtDxE4Wj8QP67OWQAg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=5&ved=0CD4Q6AEwBA#v=onepage&q=descartes%20and%20synthesis&f=false, (29/11/2011)

¹³² Ibid., 55

analysis – as ‘the best and truest method of instruction’¹³³ – and synthesis is central to Descartes’ justification of method.

Descartes’ description, and Gueroult’s clarification, seem to amount to an understanding that the *Meditations* in analytic mode would begin with the *cogito*, whereas a synthetic account would start with God, because Descartes comes to realise that his system of philosophy and everything in it, and established by it, has God as its cause, something which for Descartes is not discovered in itself until the Third Meditation. The importance of the analytic method to Descartes is that it underlines how crucial it is for his project that things are presented in the order in which he has discovered them; not how they might be presented in a method informed by hindsight. As Beck puts it, analysis is ‘not merely a setting-out of truths already discovered – but is, on the contrary, an account of the actual road of discovery. Analytic argument reflects the creative work of the author’s mind’.¹³⁴

Furthermore, that analysis ‘shows the true way by which the thing in question was discovered methodically’ highlights a theme which runs through this thesis; that there is a strong, and necessarily, cumulative nature to Descartes’ project, and that the order of discovery is therefore very important to the project’s intelligibility. That ‘synthesis, on the other hand, does not follow ‘the natural order’ of discovery, but is a logical arrangement of the truths already discovered by analysis’ points to why Descartes regarded analysis as the truest method of discovery.¹³⁵ As will be explored in more detail in the third chapter, the idea of the *Meditations* as ‘thought in progress’ is integral to the project (particularly in the context of assessing the influence of traditional meditational practice on the text). Furthermore, Descartes would therefore – consequently – regard analysis as the truest method of presentation, in view of the importance of the text gaining its power and impact from the element of reader participation in the project. This was briefly alluded to in the first chapter, and will be seen to play out further in the third chapter.

¹³³ Descartes, ‘Author’s Replies to the Second Set of Objections’, 111

¹³⁴ Beck, 24

¹³⁵ Ibid., 25

What is becoming clear, therefore, is that analysis as method is of central importance to the structure, style and progress of the *Meditations*. Indeed, if we take into account alternative understandings of the method of analysis, we can see why Descartes was so keen to stress the distinction between the analytic and synthetic modes of reasoning: the method of ‘analysis’ has an inherent stylistic and attitudinal consideration. Grayling understands it thus:

Although there is no defining *method* of analysis, there can be said to be a defining *manner* ... any careful, detailed and rigorous approach which throws light on the nature and implications of our concepts.¹³⁶

Generally speaking, ‘analysis’ as a term can be used

To express allegiance to rigour and precision ... philosophical analysis is best understood by analogy with analysis in chemistry, as being a process of investigation into the structure, functioning, and connections of a particular matter under scrutiny.¹³⁷

Though referring to ‘analysis’ in general, the above comment can apply to Descartes’ reasoning as well. By asserting the supremacy of the analytic over the synthetic method of reasoning, perhaps Descartes is emphasising to his reader the importance of the way his text is read. I mean this in two ways, as there is an interrelating dual aspect to Descartes’ understanding of the analytic method, in relation to the *Meditations*. First of all, the foundationalist tenor of Descartes’ project, particularly in the opening few meditations (as explored in the first chapter), requires that the reader considers each point step-by-step, and as a point in itself, which relies only on what has already been firmly established. Where the synthetic

¹³⁶ A.C.G. Grayling, ‘Analysis’, in T. Honderich (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 29

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 28

method would seek to – essentially – retrospectively validate a proposition stated, the analytic method works on a ‘real-time’ plane of discovery, such that the elements are gradually built up. And, as will be seen presently, this method allows Descartes to identify the Archimedean point of the *cogito*. Basically, Descartes’ foundationalist project can be seen to rely on the method of analysis. Secondly, in presenting analysis as preferable to synthesis, Descartes is making a subtle statement as to the attitude he expects from, and looks to engender in, his readers. Because analysis denotes an attitude of detailed attentiveness to each individual point in an argument, the reader must strive for such an attitude that is fitting to this method of philosophical discovery. If the reader ‘is to derive the full benefit from [Descartes’] work’, they must demonstrate ‘detailed scrutiny’, as well as an appreciation of the whole,¹³⁸ meaning that each point must be approached with attention to detail and an attitude of serious scrutiny, if the work is to be really understood, at least in the way in which Descartes wishes it to be. What this means for analysis in terms of *meditation* will be explored later on in this chapter.

The relationship between these two points appears to consist in that if one reads with the right attitude – of detailed, serious attentiveness – then they will be reading in such a way that the foundationalist project can progress in the way Descartes envisaged. Put another way, the attitude required, and the project laid out, can be said to mirror each other; as such, the text itself and the very act of reading are mutually reflective elements. Furthermore, this observation illustrates a wider point, which I have been alluding to throughout this thesis; that method, style and attitude are necessarily interactive and interdependent elements in Descartes’ project in the *Meditations*.

Furthermore, the way in which Descartes describes the superiority of a method of analysis over that of synthesis reveals to us again an emphasis which

¹³⁸ Descartes, ‘Author’s Replies to the Second Set of Objections’, 113

pervades Descartes' writing both in, and regarding, the *Meditations*. For him, analysis is 'the best and the truest' way because

If the reader is willing to follow it and give sufficient attention to all points, he will make the thing his own and understand it just as perfectly as if he had discovered it for himself.¹³⁹

And this, for Descartes, is the aim of writing the *Meditations*: to encourage his reader to look within and discover the same conclusions for himself. When we turn our attention, in due course, to the individualistic emphasis in the *Meditations*, this will manifest itself as a central element to Descartes' motivation for writing this text. This emphasises the strong experiential tenor to Descartes' *Meditations*. The *Meditations* charts the personal discovery of things, and so, on this reading, the foundationalist character which propels the project as a whole, from the outset.

Tried and Tested

What is more, Descartes seems to be speaking from experience when he so emphatically expresses his allegiance to the analytic method over and against the synthetic. Indeed, Beck suggests something of a biographical reason as to why Descartes displays such antipathy against disputation in particular as a form of reasoning:

During his final three years at La Flèche ... Descartes would have been present at, and probably taken part in, the disputations, the *actus*, set dialectical battles with a *defendens* and *impugnans*, the whole elaborate and courteous exchange of syllogisms, distinctions, contradistinctions, and subdistinctions in defence or attack of set theses ... his condemnation of the syllogism as sterile and useless is well known, and it is obvious

¹³⁹ Ibid., 110

why he wished to avoid any confusion whatsoever between his own method of philosophizing and the disputation or *actus syllogisticus*.¹⁴⁰

We know that, beyond his ‘preparatory studies’, Descartes spent three further years at La Flèche, in order to complete the course in philosophy. It was a heavily Aristotelian philosophical education, the teachers educating their students under the dictum, ‘in matters of any importance let him not depart from Aristotle’.¹⁴¹ That ‘the *Syllabus* required professors to respect Aristotle, even when they did not follow his teaching, and to refrain from presenting novel or dangerous views to their students’,¹⁴² evidences an apparently conservative and narrow approach to philosophy that was employed in this seventeenth century Jesuit educational establishment. Indeed, this seems to have – perhaps unsurprisingly – engendered in the young Descartes a need to thoroughly question, to challenge. An exploration of the context of the genesis of his opinions regarding methods of philosophical reasoning sheds valuable light on the content of Descartes’ views, particularly those found in the correspondence following his writing of the *Meditations*; such an exploration, therefore, is necessary. These three years of philosophical study at La Flèche were to form his opinions on what he saw as the shortcomings of philosophy as it was understood in the early seventeenth century. Clarke notes that

Descartes’ teachers were required to work within the principles and concepts proposed by Aristotle, and they were equally required to communicate to their young pupils the teaching of the Catholic Church as it was defined by Rome.¹⁴³

As such, it makes sense that this emphasis on the dominance – and authority – of Aristotelian philosophy developed in Descartes a suspicion of, and a distaste for, the prevalent methods of reasoning in philosophy: at La Flèche, they had been tried, tested, and, by the young Descartes, found wanting. This is particularly clear in the

¹⁴⁰ Beck, 30

¹⁴¹ ‘Rule 2’, in Clarke, 20

¹⁴² Clarke, 20

¹⁴³ Clarke, 23

case of logic, a central element of this traditional, Aristotelian, philosophical education:

When I was younger, I had studied a little logic as part of philosophy ... I noticed that, in the case of logic, its syllogisms and most of its other rules are more useful for explaining to someone else what one already knows than for learning them or even ... for speaking uncritically about things that one does not know.¹⁴⁴

As a method of discovery, the dominant modes of philosophical reasoning were found by Descartes to be simply inadequate; and discovery was what Descartes was in search of. This quotation brings us on to an important issue in the consideration of Descartes' choice of meditation as a way of refuting disputation, within the wider area of synthetic reasoning.

'Doomed to sterility'? Descartes and Syllogism

Syllogistic reasoning formed an important part of disputation; as noted above, the disputations Descartes would have participated in at La Flèche were formed of an 'elaborate and courteous exchange of syllogisms, distinctions, contradistinctions, and subdistinctions in defence or attack of set theses.'¹⁴⁵ It is becoming increasingly clear that Descartes' attitude towards the use of disputation in philosophical reasoning was one of antipathy. Where 'syllogism' itself fits into this consists in his needing to distance himself, in the *Meditations*, from the disputation style of reasoning, of which syllogism was a key element.

A stalwart of the disputation method, syllogism is an Aristotelian-derived method, best defined by Aristotle himself, as

¹⁴⁴ Descartes, in Clarke, 19

¹⁴⁵ Beck, 30

A discourse in which, a certain thing being stated, something other than what is stated follows of necessity from being so.¹⁴⁶

A typical Aristotelian example of syllogistic reasoning would be the following process:

‘All men are mortal; Greeks are men; therefore Greeks are mortal’.¹⁴⁷

In its classical form, a syllogism is composed of a universal premise, a particular premise, and a conclusion, in this order. When the particular premise is added to the universal premise, the conclusion is what is deduced from this calculation.

Williamson lends illumination to Aristotle’s definition by explaining that

A syllogism may be defined as a piece of reasoning analysable into:

1. three categorical propositions such that the third (the *conclusion*) is presented as following from the first two (the *premises*), and
2. three terms such that one of them (the *middle term*) is common to the premises, the second is common to the conclusion and one of the premises, and the third is common to the conclusion and the other premiss.¹⁴⁸

What must be clarified at this point is that Descartes does not dismiss outright all use of syllogism in philosophical reasoning, and there are times when he would even employ it himself. The second argument for the existence of God, in the Fifth Meditation, is a prime example of this. Using a form of the ontological argument

¹⁴⁶ Aristotle, in ‘Syllogism’, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*

¹⁴⁷ C. Williamson, ‘Syllogism’, in T. Honderich (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 905

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 905

originally conceived of by Anselm, Descartes argues from an analogy with the form of a triangle that God must, necessarily exist:

It is quite evident that existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than the fact that its three angles equal two right angles can be separated from the essence of a triangle, or than the idea of a mountain can be separated from the idea of a valley.¹⁴⁹

Indeed, Descartes explains in his *Replies* how this particular piece of reasoning works. Provoked by another's apparent misunderstanding, he expounds his theory in syllogistic terms:

My major premiss was this: 'That which we clearly understand to belong to the nature of something can truly be affirmed of that thing' ... the minor premiss of my argument was: 'yet it belongs to the nature of God that he exists.' And from these two premises the evident conclusion to be drawn is the one which I drew: 'Therefore it can truly be affirmed of God that he exists.'¹⁵⁰

Whether it is a methodology subconsciously engrained in him by the rigorously scholastic philosophical education he received at La Flèche, and therefore unwittingly expressed in the *Meditations*, or whether it is a purposeful move, consciously employing syllogistic methodology where he deems necessary in his philosophical project, is far from clear; Descartes is notoriously difficult to pin down when it comes to identifying a straightforward conception of method.

Such considerations as noted above are not central to the point at hand in any obvious way, but they do serve an important purpose, in illustrating that Descartes did have a place – indeed, an important one – for syllogistic reasoning within his philosophical system as expounded in the *Meditations*. As such, it shows that we

¹⁴⁹ Descartes, 'Fifth Meditation', *Meditations*, 46

¹⁵⁰ Descartes, 'Author's Replies to the Second Set of Meditations', 107

must be careful, in our assessment of Descartes' apparent attitude towards what he would have known as the traditional, dominant methods of philosophical reasoning, that we do not frame him as hypocritical, as he employs a method he seems to deplore. What is important at this point is that it is a very *specific* aspect of Descartes' *Meditations* that is being focused on here, our discussion is being formed by Descartes' Replies, regarding particular aspects of his *Meditations*.

Besides, Descartes' use of syllogistic reasoning becomes more plausible as the *Meditations* progresses. This relies on an initial suspicion of syllogism that we see play out in the formation of the *cogito*. Once this foundational point of knowledge has been established, the building up of the edifice can use epistemological techniques that do not require self-validation (as the establishment of the *cogito* did), but rather only need rely on what has gone before: what has already been established. As will become clear in our consideration of the formation of the *cogito* (below), syllogistic reasoning was not a conceivable option for Descartes, if he was looking for a self-evident, self-validating foundational point to his system; but it becomes more conceivable as the foundational system is built up.

To say, therefore, that the *Meditations* as a whole evidences Descartes' antipathy towards syllogistic reasoning would be inaccurate; it is the first few meditations in the text which evidence an insistence on Descartes' part not to be associated with, or his procedure of discovery framed as, syllogistic reasoning. This really comes into play when we look at the formation of the *cogito* in the Second Meditation. As such, it will be used as something of a case study, to determine how Descartes' understanding of, and attitude towards, syllogistic reasoning informs his process of philosophising.

The Cogito

A consideration of the formation of the *cogito* will illuminate why Descartes was often resistant to his work being labelled as syllogistic reasoning. It will also illuminate the different aspects of methods of philosophical reasoning which have been touched on so far in this chapter, to show why Descartes was keen to find an alternative to dominant philosophical methodology.

The establishment of the *cogito* is a pivotal moment in the *Meditations*; the discovery that his thinking gives rise to his existence is expressed by Descartes as the foundational point he has been searching for. In order to fulfil the foundationalist project stated at the outset – ‘to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations ...to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last’¹⁵¹ – Descartes

Must define the set of self-evident beliefs and show that its membership is both certain and extensive enough to support the rest of our knowledge about the world. His claim to certainty about his thought and existence is the initial move in his attempt to do so.¹⁵²

To do so, Descartes conveys this key moment thus: he states that it is impossible for it to be that

I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Descartes, ‘First Meditation’, *Meditations*, 12

¹⁵² P. Markie, ‘The Cogito and its importance’, in J. Cottingham (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 141-142

¹⁵³ Descartes, ‘Second Meditation’, *Meditations*, 17

Descartes has reached this point by applying extensive doubt to his thinking, working under the premise that ‘anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false’, until he reaches a point which either reveals ‘something certain’ or being ‘certain that there is no certainty.’¹⁵⁴ The role of doubt is something that will be considered in more depth in the next chapter; this is simply a brief outline of how the *cogito* is established, at a basic level. Since Descartes has purged his mind of all preconceived opinions, and is engaged in a provisional but extensive distrust of the senses, his quest is to find one fixed, immovable point by which he can attain some certainty; and from this, rebuild the edifice of knowledge, having as its foundation a stable point of surety. He ‘can hope for great things if [he] manage[s] to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable.’¹⁵⁵ Descartes therefore stakes a huge amount – indeed, at this stage at least, the survival of his project of metaphysical discovery – on the establishment of the *cogito*, as he believes it to constitute the Archimedean point in his thinking, and the universal point of departure. As such, ‘Descartes’ claim to certainty about his thought and existence is central to his general program in epistemology.’¹⁵⁶

Although a central notion to the Cartesian project in many different ways, what is important to our discussion here – how Descartes is, initially at least, hostile to the concept of syllogistic reasoning being associated with his philosophical project – is how vehemently Descartes denies that the *cogito* is established by way of syllogism. In insisting that syllogistic reasoning should not – indeed, could not, if the *cogito* was to have any coherence – be used to produce the *cogito*, he separates himself further still from the dominant tradition of philosophical reasoning, which he would have encountered in his education at La Flèche, and the expectations of which he would encounter through his correspondence after writing the *Meditations*. The strength of the expectation to adhere to this method of proposition-making was arguably what led to the strength of Descartes’ insistence that the foundations of his system be properly *foundational*, and therefore inhospitable to the syllogistic method. Indeed, it was inconceivable to him that his *Meditations* could progress if

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 16

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 16

¹⁵⁶ Markie, 141

the Archimedean point was established in this way. Therefore, the question of why the nature of the *cogito* precludes the employment of syllogistic reasoning will be the concern of the remainder of this chapter.

The point I want to make here, in line with Descartes' claims, is that the way he establishes the *cogito* and communicates it to his reader relies precisely on its *not* using syllogistic reasoning. His argument hangs together in such a way that for him to reason the *cogito* in syllogistic fashion would, in the context of his project, be incomprehensible and – effectively – nonsensical.

When we become aware that we are thinking things, this is a primary notion which is not derived by means of any syllogism. When someone says 'I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist', he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism, but recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind. This is clear from the fact that if he were deducing it by means of a syllogism, he would have to have had previous knowledge of the major premiss 'Everything which thinks is, or exists'; yet in fact he learns it from experiencing in his own case that it is impossible that he should think without existing. It is in the nature of our mind to construct general propositions on the basis of our knowledge of particular ones.¹⁵⁷

To begin to understand what Descartes means by this defence of his method against the onslaught of syllogistic expectations, it is helpful to break this down a little, by identifying two key points raised by Descartes in this rich, but dense, quotation.

¹⁵⁷ Descartes, 'Author's Replies to the Second Set of Objections', 100

The Role of Intuition

Firstly, the establishment of the *cogito* as the foundational knowledge Descartes takes it to be relies on its being a piece of intuitive knowledge rather than a deduced one. If it is to be a ‘primary notion’, in the context of Descartes’ foundationalist project, it must be ‘self-evident’ and therefore known only by ‘a simple intuition of the mind.’¹⁵⁸

To unpack the key terms of this statement, one needs to recognise what Descartes meant by something being intuitively known. In Descartes’ words, ‘intuition’ is ‘the indubitable conception of a clear and attentive mind which proceeds solely from the light of reason’, i.e. it does not depend on any presuppositions, premises or, indeed, any prior knowledge at all.¹⁵⁹ The concept is best explained when held in contrast with ‘deduction’: ‘intuition is distinguished from deduction by the fact that it does not involve a movement of thought through a series of inferences and by its immediate self-evidence’.¹⁶⁰ Deduction, on the other hand, is ‘the inference of something as following necessarily from some other propositions which are known with certainty’, i.e. deductive knowledge depends on presuppositions, premises which are known with certainty. Descartes does not, up until this stage, know anything with certainty, and therefore the *cogito* is not built, and therefore not reliant, on any pre-existing knowledge and therefore not on any premise. In Descartes’ words, ‘the items which are put forward first must be known entirely without the aid of what comes later’. This is a central tenet of Descartes’ foundationalist programme in the *Meditations*; at this point, therefore, the principle of the *cogito* derives its credibility only from what has gone before – what has already been established with certainty – which is to say, a blank slate. That the *cogito* is known by way of intuition, and not deduction, is thus vital to the Cartesian project. Essentially, therefore, for the *cogito* to be ‘self-evident’, therefore, relies on its being intuitively known, rather than known through a process of deduction.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 100

¹⁵⁹ Markie, 144

¹⁶⁰ Markie, 144

Descartes states that ‘the first principles themselves are known only through intuition, and the remote conclusions only through deduction’.¹⁶¹ This distinction between intuition and deduction is thus a cornerstone to Descartes’ philosophy in the *Meditations*, as it demonstrates why the *cogito*, as intuitively known and self-evident, is so important. Essentially, its intuitive and self-evident nature means it can constitute the foundation that Descartes has been in search of; his project can progress from there, as it is the first step to building the new edifice of knowledge: ‘having completed the systematic undermining of his earlier beliefs, Descartes begins to rebuild his epistemic world.’¹⁶²

A key element of the *cogito*, in terms of it being intuitive, is that it constitutes a single thought. The *cogito* could easily be read as one proposition (*I exist...*) that is the consequence of another proposition (*I think...*), and therefore not as properly intuitive or self-evident, and therefore not truly foundational – at least not in the way that Descartes is aiming for. Even to conceive of the *cogito* as composed of two parts of one proposition is to divide it too much. Descartes is keen, therefore, to emphasise that ‘*I exist*’ is not inferred from the premise ‘*I think*’, but rather constitutive of the same proposition (*I am thinking, therefore I exist...*), being simultaneously intuited; in one movement, the knowledge of his thinking becomes the knowledge of his existing. The points, although in some respect retrospectively divisible into two components, cannot be conceived of as separately intuited parts of the proposition, for if this were so, they would not be intuited in any proper sense. Markie conveys the issue neatly:

Descartes presents his immediate inference from his thought to his existence as a single piece of knowledge; it is the first principle of his philosophy. His point seems

¹⁶¹ Descartes, in Markie, 144

¹⁶² Flage and Bonnen, 129

to be that in one act of intuition, he grasps the premise and immediately infers the conclusion.¹⁶³

A key aspect of the *cogito* as intuition, therefore, is that ‘*I think*’ and ‘*I exist*’ are simultaneously intuited, and therefore form a single, self-evident and properly basic proposition, which can act as the self-validating Archimedean point Descartes understands – indeed, needs – it to be. Hence what is vital to consider in the case of *cogito* is how the movement from thought to existence can constitute a single, intuitive moment: it rests on its being simultaneous. To quote Markie again:

Descartes intuites the self-evident proposition that he thinks and simultaneously immediately infers that he exists. His knowledge that he thinks is intuitive in the primary sense of being self-evident and entirely noninferential; his knowledge that he exists is intuitive in the extended sense of being immediately inferred from the simultaneously intuited premise that he exists.¹⁶⁴

He goes on to explain that

The knowledge of his thought is intuitive since it involves his grasping a self-evident, noninferred premise, and his knowledge of his existence is intuitive since it involves his immediately inferring that he exists from the simultaneously intuited premise that he thinks ... Descartes presents his immediate inference from his thought to his existence as a single piece of knowledge; it is the first principle of his philosophy.¹⁶⁵

This issue of the role of intuition in Descartes’ writing – particularly in the context of its distinction from deduction – has been one of contention, and there is clearly much more that could be discussed on this topic. However, these technical

¹⁶³ Markie, 146-147

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 145-146

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 146

issues do not form the central concern of this thesis, and as such, will not be lingered upon. It is enough to appreciate on this basic level that the distinctions Descartes makes, and takes pains to emphasise, are vital to an understanding of the motivation behind his project as a whole, and more particularly, behind his choice of style. This chapter has explored the proposition that Descartes chose meditation simply as an alternative to the ‘disputation’ style of philosophical reasoning which prevailed at the time of Descartes’ writing. In using the *cogito* as a focus (establishing the existence of the self as a thinking thing), it has become clear that, because of Descartes’ distinction between intuition and deduction, the foundations of his project are rooted in an insistence that the syllogistic reasoning commonly found within disputation is not a provider of certainty. These foundations being intuitively known precludes the use of syllogistic reasoning:

Thought consequently comes first; the next determination arrived at, in direct connection with it, is the determination of Being. The ‘I think’ directly involves my Being; this, says Descartes, is the absolute basis of all Philosophy. The determination of Being is in my ‘I’; this connection is itself the first matter. Thought as Being and Being as thought - that is my certainty, ‘I’; in the celebrated *Cogito, ergo sum* we thus have Thought and Being inseparably bound together.¹⁶⁶

The Particular and the General

The second way in which the *cogito* is shown to preclude syllogistic reasoning is the phrase ‘it is in the nature of our mind to construct general propositions on the basis of our knowledge of particular ones.’¹⁶⁷ This is important to Descartes, as he is arguing against

¹⁶⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, ‘Descartes’, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*
<http://www.class.uidaho.edu/mickelsen/texts/Hegel%20-%20Hist%20Phil/Descartes.html>
 (29/11/2011)

¹⁶⁷ Descartes, ‘Author’s Replies to the Second Set of Objections’, 100

The supposition that knowledge of particular propositions must always be deduced from universal ones, following the same order as that of a syllogism in Dialectic ... It is certain that if we are to discover the truth we must always begin with particular notions in order to arrive at general ones later on (though we may also reverse the order and deduce other particular truths once we have discovered general ones).¹⁶⁸

The *cogito* functions as above: it works from the particular to the general. Descartes has established the *cogito* simply by way of his own experience, and works from this *particular* to a *general*: the proposition that one's thinking is inextricably connected to one's existing, and the knowledge of one's thinking inevitably gives rise – simultaneously, and equally intuitively, as discussed above – to the knowledge of one's existing. Again, the experiential tenor of the *Meditations* comes to the fore, as Descartes moves from the findings of his own experience to the establishment of a general theory; indeed, a general theory that he claims to be the foundations of a new philosophical system. It is not necessarily that the general *derives* from the particular, but the particular *gives rise* to the general, because of the order of thinking as it happens – in 'real time'.

This aspect of the *cogito*'s establishment would not be possible if the *cogito* was established by way of syllogism, which is, of course, what Descartes strongly denied. If his project was in line with the common 'supposition' that 'knowledge of particular propositions must always be deduced from universal ones,' then the universal knowledge of the *cogito* would give rise to the particular experience of the individual, which would undermine the very meaning and importance of the *cogito* within the *Meditations*. To do this would involve working on presuppositions of certainty, found in the 'universal'. At this point of the Second Meditation, of course, the principle of the *cogito* can derive its credibility only from what has gone before, and what has already been established. Descartes therefore objects to

¹⁶⁸ Descartes, 'Appendix to the Fifth Set of Objections and Replies', in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. II, 271

Claims that when I say ‘I am thinking, therefore I exist’ I presuppose the major premise ‘Whatever thinks exists’, and hence I have already adopted a preconceived opinion ... the most important mistake our critic makes here is the supposition that knowledge of particular propositions must always be deduced from universal ones, following the same order as that of a syllogism in Dialectic.¹⁶⁹

The suggestion, then, that the knowledge of the particular must be deduced from that of the universal is nonsensical to Descartes’ system; not only would it severely undermine the experiential element of the text and the reader participation idea which is at the heart of the meaning-making of the *Meditations*, it would also undermine the foundationalist nature of the work, since presuppositions would be used, to build knowledge that is based on working from the universal to the particular – and yet their certainty has not yet been established. It is central to Descartes’ project that the order of knowledge progresses from the particular to the universal; indeed, it is inconceivable to him that a properly foundationalist project could proceed with this order of reasoning. The *cogito*, therefore, relies on the particular giving rise to the universal, and not the other way around. Descartes’ insistence that this ‘supposition ... following the same order as that of a syllogism in Dialectic’¹⁷⁰ amounts to, at the very least, a statement that the era’s prevalent methods of reasoning are not suited to his project; or, more seriously, a direct attack on the coherence of scholastic methodology. Either way, it is becoming increasingly clear why Descartes was keen to find a style of writing that would enable him to separate himself, for the foundational stages of his project at least, from the dominant modes of disputation and its ally of syllogistic reasoning.

Importantly, however, Descartes does qualify the aforementioned statement that knowledge should progress from the particular to the universal, by writing that although to begin with – at the outset of the project – particular notions come first and give rise to the general, ‘we may also reverse the order and deduce other

¹⁶⁹ Markie, 149

¹⁷⁰ Descartes, ‘Appendix to the Fifth Set Objections and Replies’, 271

particular truths once we have discovered general ones'¹⁷¹. Whilst this could be considered a concession to traditional reasoning methodology, and therefore somewhat defeatist, I think that it is quite the opposite. Firstly, it is merely a possibility, but not one that is entertained here, in the context of the establishment of the *cogito*; it remains vital that the *cogito* be established by a movement from particular to the general, not least because of the 'real time' way in which the *cogito* is experienced and established by Descartes, which he then communicates to his reader so that they in turn can experience this Archimedean moment in the process of the *Meditations*. Secondly, and relatedly, the point of Descartes' qualification seems to be that in the wider context of his philosophy, the idea of moving only from the particular to the universal is not a fixed one; it is simply immovable in the establishment of the *cogito*.

This is arguably why the use of syllogism becomes more of a plausible epistemological option for Descartes as the *Meditations* progresses, as considered earlier in this chapter; while the first point of knowledge – the *cogito* – was built from a necessary transition from the *particular* to the *general*, subsequent points of knowledge can be established by a reversal of this process, such that they evidence a transition from the *general* to the *particular*, as is clear in parts of the text. Once the Archimedean point of the *cogito* has been established, in its self-evidencing, self-validating way, the way is opened up for different processes of reasoning to be employed, whilst retaining credibility. Propositions subsequent to the *cogito* are indeed built on presuppositions, but ones which stem from the fixed, stable point of the *cogito*. This is plausible because they are built on an intuitively known, self-evident knowledge of the *particular*, which can now give rise to the *general*. It is in this way that the edifice of knowledge is built up and the *Meditations*, as (firstly, at least) a foundationalist project, can progress. Descartes does not argue that there is only one way of gaining knowledge – that it must be intuitive and self-evident – but simply that only this method of intuition will work for the foundation of the system. It is only for the *first* piece of knowledge that syllogism cannot fit, in order to be properly foundational, as Descartes so uncompromisingly searches for.

¹⁷¹ Descartes, 'Appendix to the Fifth Set Objections and Replies', 271

Of course, the question that arises from this conception of the processes at work in the *Meditations* is that of circularity. Articulated by Antoine Arnauld in the *Objections*, and seen as problematic by many others since, the circle has been identified as the fatal flaw in Descartes' system. To quote Arnauld's accusation:

You are not certain of the existence of God, and you say that you are not certain of anything, and cannot know anything clearly and distinctly until you have achieved clear and certain knowledge of the existence of God. It follows from this that you do not yet clearly and distinctly know that you are a thinking thing, since, on your own admission, that knowledge depends on the clear knowledge of an existing God; and this you have not yet proved in the passage where you draw the conclusion that you clearly know what you are.¹⁷²

Arnauld then goes on to ask,

How the author avoids reasoning in a circle when he says that we are sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true only because God exists.¹⁷³

Descartes' response to this charge of circularity is based on the role of memory; God is not the guarantor of 'clear and distinct ideas' (as Arnauld understands the dilemma), but rather the guarantor of memory. Therefore,

We are sure that God exists because we attend to the arguments which prove this; but subsequently it is enough for us to remember that we perceived something

¹⁷² Descartes, 'Author's Replies to the Second Set of Objections', 89

¹⁷³ A. Arnauld, 'Fourth Set of Objections', in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. II, 150

clearly in order for us to be certain that it is true. This would not be sufficient if we did not know that God exists and is not a deceiver.¹⁷⁴

What I want to do here is to suggest briefly an alternative defence of Descartes against the charge of circularity. On a more sympathetic reading of Descartes, I suggest that the circle does not really pose a problem for the *Meditations* – and certainly not one that is fatal to the project. This is because of what we know about analysis, as explored above, and thereby Descartes' method for both forming and presenting ideas. It was established above that his preference for the analytic method over the synthetic is rooted in his emphasis on the importance of reading the text in 'real time', as if the reader is discovering it for themselves. This idea will be articulated more fully in the third chapter, but what it means at this point is that to read it as a 'thinking in progress', in its essentially cumulative character, is to focus on the key moments such as the *cogito* and the trademark argument for God's existence in its proper context, rather than merely retrospectively. To do this means that the charge of circularity becomes less problematic. The *cogito* is established, as a pivotal foundational moment; and as Descartes' thought process develops, the argument for God's existence is established, in the third meditation. These are natural stages in the process of thought that drives the *Meditations*. To read it as Descartes intended – as an individual, re-enacting his journey, is to appreciate the cumulative nature of the text's unfolding. As such, the two elements constituting the circle – the establishment of clear and distinct ideas, and the trademark argument for the existence of God – act as stages in the argument. It is only when the text is viewed retrospectively, isolating certain elements, that the charge of circularity can be levelled at Descartes. It is therefore an unfair accusation, as it neglects the very act of reading that is so vital to the *Meditations*.

Furthermore, as explored in the first chapter, the epistemological emphasis in the *Meditations* appears to shift from foundationalist to coherentist. On such a reading, the charge of circularity is not a threat to Descartes' project; to go further, it

¹⁷⁴ Descartes, 'Author's Replies to the Fourth Set of Objections', in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. II, 171

perhaps strengthens it. The establishment of clear and distinct ideas, and the argument for God's existence, can both be foundationalist claims in their own right, due to the cumulative nature of discovery; but as the *Meditations* progresses, they develop a coherentist relationship to each other in terms of how the whole system, once complete, hangs together. Their interdependency, therefore, need not be 'viciously' circular, but rather evidence of the epistemological evolution of the project's methodology.

What both these points show is that as an argument in itself, presented in isolation, the charge of circularity is indeed problematic; however, in the context of the text as a whole (and in the context of Descartes' comments regarding method), it demands a more sympathetic interpretation.

In returning to the main argument of this chapter, therefore, bringing these various strands of thought together, there are three identifiable reasons why Descartes did not wish the *cogito* to be associated with syllogistic reasoning. Firstly, as established above, to use syllogism in the formation of the *cogito* would be unsound, in terms of what the *cogito* is and what it represents for Descartes' project as a whole. If it were to be a syllogism, then we would have to presuppose the truth of a universal premise, 'Everything that...', but this is premature, and Descartes is not in the habit of making presuppositions, particularly at this early, crucial stage in his project. Essentially, syllogisms rely on presuppositions; this strikes the wrong note in the process of the *Meditations*. Foundationalism is a central tenet of Descartes' thought, and is the model of reasoning on which his project relies. The *cogito*, therefore, must be properly foundational. To appear to be engaging in syllogistic reasoning in order to establish the fundamental truths of his system would be to betray the self-stated foundational objective of his project. Williams phrases this succinctly:

The point that [Descartes] is making is not just that he does not as a matter of fact conduct a syllogistic inference, but that he is in no position to, since such inference would rely on a premiss which he is in no position to know.¹⁷⁵

Secondly, if the *cogito* were established by way of syllogism, it would undermine the cumulative tenor of his thought, as it relies on a progression and building; what is more, this cumulative element relies on the reasoning process taking place in the present, and not as a retrospective validated proposition. That ‘the *cogito* ... is not a proposition to be argued, but rather a truth to be discovered’ touches on a key theme – that the *Meditations* evidences thinking in progress – is something which will be explored in the next chapter.¹⁷⁶

Thirdly – and this is something which will play out in more detail in the next chapter – Descartes’ antipathy towards the use of syllogistic reasoning in establishing the *cogito* would seem to be as much about attitude as anything else. The way in which Descartes refers to the dominant mode of disputation implies that he holds it in low regard, as it is for those who prefer ease of acceptance to the rigour of analytic thinking; disputation therefore carries connotations of complacency, as ‘when the synthetic method of writing is used, people generally think that they have learned more than is in fact the case.’¹⁷⁷ Hence synthesis as a method ‘is not as satisfying as the method of analysis, nor does it engage the minds of those who are eager to learn, since it does not show how the thing in question was discovered.’¹⁷⁸

That Descartes framed the question of style in terms of what is wrong with the dominant epistemology of the day is perhaps, therefore, a way of Descartes

¹⁷⁵ B.A.O. Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2005), 273-74

http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=fYFWLu6Vc7IC&pg=PA73&lpg=PA73&dq=descartes+and+syllogism&source=bl&ots=SnWfHcf20c&sig=I1Sl8UksPqhtsJZ9UbjU_Mt9AEo&hl=en&ei=RbvUTpGgE4mx8gPUq9yiAg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=10&ved=0CFEQ6AEwCQ#v=onepage&q=descartes%20and%20syllogism&f=false (29/11/2011)

¹⁷⁶ Hettche, 308

¹⁷⁷ Descartes, ‘Author’s Replies to the Second Set of Objections’, 112

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 111

emphasising the need for particular types of people to undertake his project; he ‘wanted to make it clear that [he] would have nothing to do with anyone who was not willing to join me in meditating and giving the subject attentive consideration.’¹⁷⁹ As will become clear in the following sections of this chapter, Descartes’ places an uncompromising emphasis on the need for individual effort in the meditational quest for first philosophy.

Conclusion

Descartes’ comments regarding his choice of style have been illuminating. What has been established in this chapter is that Descartes’ choice of meditation as a style is framed not in terms of asserting the positive value of the meditational genre, but rather in terms of Descartes’ negative assessment of the role of the prevalent epistemological options of the time; he therefore seeks an alternative method. This motivation to identify a preferable alternative to disputation was traced to his emphatic distinction between the analytic and synthetic methods of philosophical reasoning, and the way in which his attitude towards syllogism plays out in the *Meditations*, particularly concerning the *cogito*. Cartesian scholarship is full of discussion as to whether Descartes – unwittingly or not – did actually use syllogistic reasoning to establish the *cogito*, or, indeed, created a syllogism by doing so. My point here was not about discussing the validity of Descartes’ anti-syllogistic claims surrounding the establishment of the *cogito*, but rather to emphasise the vehemence with which Descartes stresses that the *cogito* is not established by way of syllogism. It thereby constitutes an assertion of independence from the dominant tradition of syllogism-centred philosophical disputation. Why Descartes was keen to seek an alternative to the dominant modes of reasoning of the time has become clear during the course of this chapter.

So what needs to be done now is allow the findings of this chapter to inform our assessment of why Descartes *actively* chose the meditational genre as this

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 112

alternative, and move away from this choice being defined in a negative manner (as it has been so far, in terms of Descartes' antipathy towards disputation). We have seen why he sought an alternative to disputation – but why *meditation* as a suitable alternative? It will become clear that we can tell a substantial amount from Descartes' attitude to the prevalent philosophical methods of the time as to why he chose meditation as the style of his text. The next, and final, chapter will consider why he might have 'positively' chosen the meditational genre, and it will argue that meditation provides Descartes with a style suited to the communication of his aims, expectations, and philosophical ideas. Furthermore, in doing so, we can pick up again the question of the Ignatian connection, now the choice of genre has been contextualised by use of Descartes' own words; and attempt once more to establish the nature and extent of this connection, now we are informed by Descartes' own philosophical motivations.

Chapter Three: What Meditation Means to the *Meditations*: Towards an Understanding of the Influence of the Meditational Style on Descartes

Introduction

Informed by the discoveries of the previous chapter, this chapter will now shift the focus to a consideration of why Descartes opted to employ the meditational style in his *Meditations* – not simply as a viable alternative to disputation, but rather as a positive choice in itself. This chapter will therefore assess what value Descartes placed on the meditational style. Therefore, this chapter considers afresh the issues raised in the first chapter, that of the nature and extent of the Ignatian meditational influence on the *Meditations*. The note of caution struck in the first chapter is still relevant, of course – and it should inform our findings. However, this third chapter is more constructive, in terms of how we can interpret the Ignatian meditational influence on the *Meditations*, in order further to illuminate our understanding of the text. The first chapter established that there is clearly an Ignatian influence on the *Meditations*, but the chapter's focus was, firstly, to establish a basic historical-biographical influence between Ignatius and Descartes; secondly, to introduce the idea of a textual connection between the *Spiritual Exercises*; and thirdly – and relatedly – to demonstrate the danger of overstating this connection.

With this warning against overstatement in mind, this chapter will pick up again the strand of Ignatian meditation, shifting this time to a more 'positive' consideration of the evidence for an Ignatian presence in the project of the *Meditations*. I will argue that there are affinities between the two texts which merit the conclusion that there is a significant – but complex – connection. This third chapter will move away from the subject of the first chapter, which was with the more superficial claims about the existence of a textual connection between Descartes and Ignatius. Instead, it will be focused on significant affinities between the *Meditations* and the *Spiritual Exercises*, which are rooted in a deeper level of similarity. It will be concerned with those elements which 'appear to prefigure a particular procedural nuance or insight later

developed by Descartes'.¹⁸⁰ Drawing on some 'identifiable issues of mutual concern',¹⁸¹ the aim of this chapter will be, in line with the previous two chapters of the thesis, to establish possible reasons for Descartes' entitling his work *Meditations*. Working closely with both primary texts, I will argue that the Ignatian influence is clear, and therefore to read the *Meditations* as 'meditation' in this sense informs the text as a whole and is thus of central importance to an informed, accurate and considered reading of the *Meditations*. However, this affinity between Ignatius and Descartes' text consists not in any simple, straightforward or obvious imitation of form or style; it is far subtler than this, and is found in the many layers of style and meaning within Descartes' text. That said, the subtle way in which the Ignatian-Cartesian textual connection is played out in the *Meditations* should not lead us to underestimate the significance.

Essentially, this chapter has a dual concern, which is necessarily interrelated. It will examine both how the *Meditations* bears significant relation to the Ignatian meditational tradition; and why Descartes' would seek this affinity. The chapter opens with the exploration of the idea of meditation as something of a 'thinking in progress', before moving into a consideration of how this might be achieved, and how Descartes uses elements of the Ignatian meditational style to do this; these key elements are, first of all, the emphasis placed on the importance of individual effort and reader participation; and secondly, the value of solitude and the creation of a suitable environment in which meditation can take place. The strands will be drawn together in the final section, which focuses on the important element of meditation: 'meditation as transformation'. This will create a clearer idea of how the genre of meditation plays a central and vital role in the creation, conception and expression of his project, rendering the process of the *Meditations* transformative.

¹⁸⁰ Stohrer, 13

¹⁸¹ Stohrer, 16

Thinking in Progress: Meditation as an Activity

The way in which Descartes explains his choice of ‘meditation’ as a style in the context of his antipathy for disputation can arguably tell us something about why he *actively* chose the meditational style, rather than viewing it simply as a viable alternative – for which there might have been many candidates.

That Descartes argues against the conception that philosophical reasoning is a strictly formulaic process shows that not only does this style not suit his foundationalist project – as previously established – but also that it does not fit with the type of thinking process that Descartes both adheres to, and evidences, in his text. Furthermore, the thinking process expressed in the *Meditations* seems to also be something which he seeks to engender in his readers. It was discussed in the previous chapter that ‘the cogito is not a proposition to be argued, but rather a truth to be discovered’,¹⁸² and this proves particularly apt when exploring why Descartes made a positive decision to choose meditation as more than merely a viable alternative to disputation; in exploring how this idea plays out in the text, we can begin to build a picture of the reasons why Descartes would have wished his work to be associated with traditional meditational reasoning, especially in the context of a comparison with the Ignatian meditation of the *Spiritual Exercises*. By noting significant affinities with aspects of the Ignatian meditational text, it becomes clearer why Descartes wished to use this genre. That the *cogito* is ‘a truth to be discovered’ indicates that the *cogito* is, in some way, a process in itself; it is not the detachable product of alienable components of reasoning, but rather a reasoning process in itself, and in such a way, the end is, effectively, found in the means. Meditation, as a process, suits this project. As such, it is this element of discovery which will form the focus of this first section of the chapter.

¹⁸² Hettche, 308

That meditation is a process – indeed, an activity – is something deeply rooted in the concept of meditation itself. Referring back to the opening lines of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius understands the phrase ‘Spiritual Exercises’ to mean

Any method of examining our own conscience, and also of meditating, contemplating, praying mentally and orally ... In the same way that walking, travelling, and running are corporal exercises, so preparing and disposing the soul to remove all inordinate attachments, and after they have been removed, searching and finding the will of God about the management of one’s life and the salvation of the soul are spiritual exercises.¹⁸³

As a totalising experience, it is clearly, therefore, something that one *does*, rather than a subject one *studies*. The retreatants embark on this retreat in order to ‘labour vigorously’ through a series of challenging exercises, from which they will derive spiritual benefit.¹⁸⁴ The Exercises are a clearly presented, prescribed set of activities; the retreatant does not reflect abstractly on a series of propositions, but rather involves themselves in an activity which demands the full use of their senses (as will be explored below), and the whole of their being. This central element of the Ignatian meditational genre will play out in various ways, and impacts on diverse elements of the Ignatian and Cartesian meditations – that it is an individual activity for which self-effort and motivation is required; that it is a process of personal transformation; that particular settings and circumstances are required for this process – and these concerns will form the content of this chapter. For the time being, however, what is important to highlight is the wider, more general point, that these meditations are *exercises*.

In a similar way, it is clear from the outset of the *Meditations* that Descartes understands his work likewise. The instructions and warnings to his reader, regarding attitude, point to the conception of the work as a process, an activity; his reader is

¹⁸³ Ignatius, ‘First Annotation’, *Spiritual Exercises* [1], 3

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., ‘Eleventh Annotation’ [11], 6

embarking on a subjective, highly involving process, rather than an objective consideration of a proposition to be argued. That he ‘would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously’ suggests that the very act of reading is a process, an activity in itself, rather than a passive event. Indeed, in recalling Descartes’ explicit explanation of his choice of genre – meditation as preferable to disputation – he frames the issue in terms of the type of reader he wishes to avoid, ‘anyone who was not willing to join me in meditating and giving the subject attentive consideration.’¹⁸⁵ He implies by this that a high level of involvement is required, and one that is not to be taken lightly. In the act of meditating, the reader will be embarking on the project themselves, taking part in a process, and experiencing this type of reasoning as an activity.

At the heart of Descartes’ project in the *Meditations* is a strong feeling that philosophy in its proper form must involve one getting their hands dirty, that

Philosophy is not a class-room subject of instruction but a special kind of activity; and that, accordingly, nobody can really begin to understand it except by being induced to indulge in the actual exercise of it, by grappling with the problems under the guidance and help of a more experienced thinker, but, nevertheless, in the last resort, thinking the problems out for himself.¹⁸⁶

Perhaps, as Beck suggests, Descartes’ conception of philosophy as an activity was ‘as old as Socrates and happily vigorous at the present day’;¹⁸⁷ or perhaps it is the product of experience, of a struggle with the dominant style of disputation that characterised his early encounters with philosophical reasoning, as a result of his conservative, scholastic education at La Flèche. The interest here lies in how Descartes manages to communicate this idea of philosophy-as-activity to his readers, and his way of expressing to them ‘the special way in which his work should be read

¹⁸⁵ Descartes, ‘Author’s Replies to the Second Set of Objections’, 112

¹⁸⁶ Beck, 30

¹⁸⁷ Beck, 30

and studied.¹⁸⁸ In drawing upon the Ignatian conception of meditation as an activity, Descartes employs this style of writing as a way of making clear the motivations, aims, and expectations of his project in the *Meditations*. That Ignatius and Descartes share this disposition towards thought being an active process demonstrates how the influence of the *Spiritual Exercises* is becoming evident in the *Meditations*.

Lang's distinction between 'saying' and 'doing' proves helpful here, in her astute comments about the nature of using the meditational style within philosophical writing:

The genre of the meditation, like the act of meditation, turns out to be a doing as well as a saying, and the doing is in fact broader than saying, *much* broader if saying is regarded primarily as asserting a series of otherwise independent propositions ... Descartes was concerned not only to say what he had to say but, by means of the saying, to *establish* what was said, first in his own life and then in the life of the reader who was thus to be no mere observer but an agent in the same process.¹⁸⁹

This element of participation will be of concern later in this chapter. At this stage, it is important to note that the 'doing' is at the heart of the meditational style, and at the heart of Descartes' conscious choice of genre for his text. The saying would appear to gain its effect from the fact that it is a 'done' thing as well as a 'said' thing; in such a way, the 'doing' has an affirmative quality and valuably enables Descartes to express his ideas with vigour, one that is constantly renewed by the independent 'doing' process of every new reader.

The question I now want to ask is how Descartes creates this 'doing' effect in the *Meditations*, emulating the activity that characterises the Ignatian meditation, in order to make his own text an activity in itself. One possible answer to this question

¹⁸⁸ Beck, 30

¹⁸⁹ Lang, 34

can be found by looking beyond the implications found in the preface to the text, and rather into the text itself.

The Present Tense

Descartes' *Meditations* is written largely in the present tense. A consideration of this element yields interesting results, and ones which are central to our understanding of Descartes' invocation of the meditational genre. The use of the present tense has a threefold effect: firstly, a sense of inclusion is established; secondly, the present tense provides and enables a sense of continuity allowing the cumulative nature of the project to be fulfilled; and thirdly, the vividity created by the use of the present tense ensures that the process is a lived, 'real time' activity.

Firstly, then, on one level Descartes' use of the present tense has an inclusive role, as it is highly involving of the reader. By reading Descartes' ideas in the present tense, the reader can, in some way, live the experiences for themselves, whilst being subtly guided by the narrator through the process. This technique gains impact from the effect it has on the reader, as there is a subtle act of persuasion at play here; the reader, in being drawn into the narrative, is intended to feel as if they are forming the ideas presented for themselves and thereby participating in the act of creation, of discovery, of breaking new ground and establishing sound ideas.

Take, for example, the opening of the Second Meditation. Descartes describes how

It feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles me around so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim up to the top.¹⁹⁰

¹⁹⁰ Descartes, 'Second Meditation', *Meditations*, 16

The use of such vivid metaphor and imagery here is powerful. Descartes has selected an image to which his reader can relate; and which, by this stage, his reader should probably be feeling themselves. It has the combined power of accessibility and empathy which allows Descartes to subtly form a relationship between author and reader, through the role of the narrator. Furthermore, this example emphasises the central importance of the autobiographically experiential element to both texts. It matters that Descartes has felt this despair, just as it matters that Ignatius' prescriptions of spiritual exercises are based on experience; it is as if they provide some element of credibility, and makes the experience very real to the reader. In Descartes' vivid description of what he felt at this stage in the process, the reader can compare their own feelings and reactions at this point, and thereby be actively participating in the meditational experience.

What is more, in following these thoughts, the reader is brought to the point of the establishment of the *cogito*:

Let [the evil demon] deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.¹⁹¹

That this Archimedean moment is described in the present tense – that the *cogito* is established in the present tense – makes it an unavoidably pivotal moment. Arguably it would still be a pivotal moment if it were not written in the present tense; but I have an inclination that the reader is somehow – perhaps subconsciously – brought into play by the use of the present tense, constituting an involvement in this important moment. For Descartes, the ideal situation would be that the reader, having followed the author's directives, would have used the text as guide to the process: a

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 17

process which they would have created for themselves by using the Cartesian-recommended techniques of ‘turning inward’ to discover the innate ideas lying in every human mind. Therefore, the discovery of the *cogito* is not one exclusively for Descartes; indeed, it derives its very meaning from its universal accessibility, and from the process of an individual’s discovery. In this way, the text actually seeks an involved, active reader from which the process derives its very intelligibility; there is an immediacy created by the use of the present tense, by which the ideas become new possibilities once again: the reader discovers for themselves what Descartes discovered for himself. This ideal is an identifiably Ignatian one; the *Meditations*, like the *Spiritual Exercises*, are exercises to be performed and experienced – as Ignatius did; as Descartes did – not passively considered from a distance. Involvement is key because just as Ignatius’ exercises ‘are not abstract; their author lived them and put them to the test of experience, his own as well as others’,¹⁹² Descartes places an emphasis on the avoidance of abstraction. To abstract ideas would be to distance oneself from immediate involvement in the ideas themselves, thereby rendering the whole exercise static, sterile and objective, all of which Descartes sought to avoid. Essentially, the *Meditations* depends on total, subjective, involved activity.

The second – and necessarily related – role of the present tense is to create a sense of continuity that will ensure that the text retains a cumulative character. The reader’s active involvement in the text, brought about at least in part by the use of the present tense, ensures that the reader is experiencing a sense of continuity. By providing this sense of continuity, Descartes ensures that the progression of the text remains cumulative; the reader, living the reasoning process in ‘real time’, forms ideas steadily and cumulatively, in line with the foundational aim of the project, and, as has become clear throughout this thesis, the cumulative nature of the process gives life and meaning to the project. Its significance, therefore, cannot be underestimated.

¹⁹² J.E. Canavan, ‘The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius’, *The Irish Monthly*, Vol. 76, No. 901 (Jul., 1948), 303
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20515832> (15/11/2011)

Descartes' reaction to the suggestion that the *Replies* to the *Objections* (following the writing of the *Meditations*) be included within the text of the *Meditations* is illuminating, as it demonstrates Descartes' own, uncompromising emphasis on the importance of continuity within his work:

I do not think that it would be useful, or even possible, to insert into my meditations the answers to the objections that may be made to them. That would interrupt the flow and even destroy the force of my arguments.¹⁹³

It is interesting that even regarding the *Objections* and *Replies* – which form an important part of the *Meditations* as a whole – Descartes is hostile to the idea of interrupting the flow of the text. The implication of this, of course, is that the order of the *Meditations* is key, and the 'flow' of the arguments clearly of vital importance to Descartes in the *Meditations*; the text would seem to derive its very intelligibility from the cumulative way in which the process is carried out.

The third effect of the present tense that I will consider is that of vividity. It has been established, in the previous two points, that the present tense creates a sense of inclusion and of continuity, thereby aiding the central cumulative element of the *Meditations*; and it has become clear that reader involvement is vitally important. This third aspect will therefore consider how else Descartes ensures that the reader is involved, and experiencing continuity, in order for the process to be an activity.

As alluded to in the first chapter, Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* are highly imagistic: he draws on the application of all the senses in order to render the exercises involving; the scenes imagined are made vivid in this way. A clear example of this is found in the Fifth Exercise of the First Week: the 'contemplation of hell'.¹⁹⁴ Each of the five senses is called upon, and the creation of such a vivid scene ensures

¹⁹³ Descartes, in Lang, 21

¹⁹⁴ Ignatius, 'Fifth Exercise', *Spiritual Exercises* [65], 23-25

the total participation of the retreatant. Firstly, the retreatant is instructed to ‘see with the imagination the large fires burning in hell’; secondly, to ‘hear with the imagination lamentations, cries, screams’; thirdly, ‘to smell smoke, sulphur’; fourthly, ‘to taste the most sour things’; and fifthly, ‘with the sense of touch to feel those same fires that consume souls enveloped in them.’¹⁹⁵

As explored in the first chapter, Ignatius places a premium on the value of the senses in the exercise of meditation, understanding the ‘application of the senses’ to play a key role in the exercises: ‘it is good to exercise the five senses of the imagination’.¹⁹⁶ Canavan captures well the significance of sense and setting in the *Spiritual Exercises*:

The power of the Exercises often resides not so much in what they say but rather in the surroundings in which they place the Exercitant, thus forcing upon him in a vivid human way the importance and urgency of that life in which he stands, the heavy responsibility which overshadows that game of consequences wherein he dices with the world, the flesh and the devil. He is put kneeling at the foot of the Cross; he is bade to stand before the whole court of heaven; he is told to see himself as an exile in a vast and dreary wilderness, as a soldier in combat, as sick and lying on his deathbed.¹⁹⁷

On the contrary, Descartes’ attitude of suspicion towards the senses – at least in the first few meditations – preclude the possibility of their being used to ensure the vividness of the reader’s experience. However, this is not to say that Descartes’ *Meditations* lack the vividness of Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*: far from it. What Ignatius does by the invocation of the senses, Descartes achieves by (an arguably conscious) effective use of the present tense.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. [66-70], 24

¹⁹⁶ Ignatius, ‘Fifth Contemplation’, *Spiritual Exercises* [121], 34

¹⁹⁷ Canavan, 309

The doubt which pervades the First Meditation is depicted – and communicated – very vividly by Descartes. Scene-setting, for example, is done with detailed description, for which the use of the present tense is vital:

There are many other beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible, even though they are derived from the senses – for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands...¹⁹⁸

The reader cannot help but be drawn in, by the vivid portrayal of this almost tangible encounter. The reader can sit by the fire, wear the dressing gown, hold the paper in their hands; it is a very ‘real’ scene. In this way, Descartes ensures that the reader is actively involved in this reasoning process, and can draw the conclusions from themselves, thereby participating in the progression of reasoning, under the guiding hand of the narrator.

Indeed, Descartes uses this technique – employing the present tense to its full potential – to introduce and explore the ‘dream argument’ of the First Meditation:

How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events – that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! Yet at the moment my eyes are certainly wide awake when I look at this piece of paper; I shake my head and it is not asleep; as I stretch out and feel my hand I do so deliberately, and I know what I am doing. All this would not happen with such distinctness to someone asleep...¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ Descartes, ‘First Meditation’, *Meditations*, 12-13

¹⁹⁹ Descartes, ‘First Meditation’, *Meditations*, 13

He goes on to suggest:

Suppose then that I am dreaming, and that these particulars – that my eyes are open, that I am moving my head and stretching out my hands – are not true. Perhaps, indeed, I do not even have such hands or such a body at all...²⁰⁰

This is an effective way of instilling doubt in the reader's minds, in making them feel it for themselves, and thereby encouraging them to question their own individual, 'real time' experiences in the present. In such a way, the reader's involvement has become totalising. Essentially, what Descartes has done here, with the use of the present tense, is to employ a meditational principle – that the process of thinking and reasoning is, necessarily, a vivid activity – and expresses it in a novel way. Although they express it in slightly different ways, both Ignatius and Descartes understand their meditational exercises to be an activity, and build their texts around this central principle.

The Importance of Individual Effort and Participation

Individual Effort as the Driving Force of Meditation

To read the *Meditations* in this way – as an activity, a 'thinking in progress' – requires a great deal of self-motivation and self-effort. This part of the chapter centres on exploring an aspect of the Ignatian and Cartesian meditations which is so strikingly paralleled between the two works – that of their emphasis on the effort required of each individual reader – and what light this can shed on their respective projects. Furthermore, such a comparison is part of the wider consideration of whether in reflecting important elements of the *Spiritual Exercises* Descartes hoped

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 13

to echo the Ignatian meditational process, and therefore made a conscious decision to emulate aspects of the mode.

Descartes demands of his reader the willingness ‘to join [him] in meditating and giving the subject attentive consideration’, so that the reader can ‘derive the full benefit from [his] work’. Descartes actively discourages anyone who is not willing to make a huge personal effort to embark on this process; he claims he is

Right to require particularly careful attention from my readers; and the style of writing that I selected was one which I thought would be most capable of generating such attention. I am convinced that my readers will derive more benefit from this than they will themselves realise ... I think it is fair for me to reject out of hand, and despise as worthless, the verdict given on my work by those who refuse to meditate with me and who stick to their preconceived opinions.²⁰¹

Dedication to the task of the *Meditations* is something which Descartes views as requiring great discipline and an ‘attentive’ attitude. As such, Descartes states that ‘the style of writing that I selected was one which I thought would be most capable of generating such attention.’²⁰² From the outset, the reader is made aware that Descartes has little time for those who do not come to the project ready to give close consideration to each individual part of the text; and therein lies the challenge of the *Meditations*: he requires only those readers who are capable of approaching his work in the desired way: ‘I reckon that both the overall and the detailed scrutiny is necessary if the reader is to derive the full benefit from my work.’²⁰³

His choice of style reflects the emphasis on effort that characterises the Ignatian meditational style; the demands made by both writers, regarding attitude, are strikingly similar and they hold similar expectations of their readers, shown by clear

²⁰¹ Descartes, ‘Author’s Replies to the Second Set of Objections’, 112

²⁰² Ibid., 112

²⁰³ Ibid., 113

‘attitudinal directives’. That their work is so clearly aligned, in this respect, could indeed arguably constitute grounds on which to make the case for an Ignatian-Cartesian connection.

In the Second Week of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius makes an interesting distinction between three different kinds of men, in terms of their attitude towards the task at hand, which is the detachment of the self from ‘inordinate attachments’ in order to progress with the exercises in a constructive fashion; that is to say, with the right state of mind, self-motivation and high levels of effort.²⁰⁴ The first kind of man ‘wishes indeed to be free from attachment ... in order to be reconciled with God ... but, during his entire lifetime, he does not take the necessary means or accept the necessary help.’ The second man ‘also desires to remove this disorderly attachment, but in the meantime he obstinately clings to the thing; he rather wants to draw God to his wish, instead of removing the impediment and aiming at Him by a more suitable way of life.’ The third ‘is equally ready to get rid of or keep the thing, according to what he will have perceived through divine inspiration or the counsel of reason ... he only considers and looks for such a service’.

This allegory, distinguishing between different attitudes towards the task at hand, serves to highlight the importance with which Ignatius regards the issue of attitude among retreatants, and therefore tells us something about his wider project, framed in terms of the reader needing an attitude of self-effort and self-responsibility, if the reader is to reap the reward of the meditational process. That this is a requirement shared by both Ignatius and Descartes, is shown by quoting both writers directly alongside each other. Descartes states that

The judgement of many people is so silly and weak that, once they have accepted a view, they continue to believe it, however false and irrational it may be ... those who do not bother to grasp the proper order of my arguments and the connection between

²⁰⁴ See Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises* [149-157], 40-41

them, but merely try to carp at individual sentences, as is the fashion, will not get much benefit from reading this book.²⁰⁵

This is a striking echo of Ignatius, who writes that

The person who gives to another a method and order for meditation ... must faithfully narrate the story to be meditated on ... by merely passing through the principal points and adding only brief clarifications; so that the one who is going to meditate, after having first accepted the basis of historical truth, will then go over it and consider it by himself ... he will harvest a more delightful taste and more abundant fruit than if the same thing had been more extensively narrated and explained by someone else.²⁰⁶

Here is evidenced an interesting paralleling of the conception of the task from Ignatius and Descartes; the emphasis is clearly on the need for individual effort and right attitude. That their aims are understood in terms of reaping rewards – deriving ‘benefit’ from the activity, and ‘harvest[ing] ... abundant fruit’ – points to an alignment of aim between the two writers; thus, to associate himself with the meditational genre in this way allows Descartes to communicate clearly what he expects of the reader in line with his conception of the project.

Furthermore, the emphasis placed on the importance of individual effort in the activity of meditation is also expressed by way of both writers’ acknowledgement of the difficulties involved in the task, for which self-effort and correct motivation is essential. Such an attitude is therefore required, in part at least, because of the arduous nature of the task ahead. Neither writer makes any secret of the challenging character of the meditational journey; the way they present it ensures that any individual enters the process unaware of the difficulties they could – indeed, almost certainly *will* – encounter. To convey this aspect clearly to the reader acts as a

²⁰⁵ Descartes, ‘Preface to the reader’, *Meditations*, 8

²⁰⁶ Ignatius, ‘Second Annotation’, *Spiritual Exercises* [2], 3-4

method of simultaneously preparing the meditator for the challenges ahead, by issuing something of a warning; and to ensure that the meditator is of a suitable character to begin with. This is why the instructions to the reader provided at the outset are issued in a rather formidable way.

A Formidable Task

Although Ignatius and Descartes have high expectations of their readers, as seen above, they do openly acknowledge the difficulties that are likely to be encountered when embarking on their challenging programmes; they are therefore realistic about what to expect. Ignatius, for example, acknowledges that

It is easy and light to complete a contemplation for an entire hour when consolation abounds. On the contrary, it is very difficult when desolation occurs.²⁰⁷

An echo of this can be identified in Descartes' statement that

I do know that even those who do concentrate, and earnestly pursue the truth, will find it very difficult to take in the entire structure of my *Meditations*, while at the same time having a distinct grasp of the individual parts that make it up.²⁰⁸

These acknowledgements give the texts a very human touch, and we are reminded of the experiential tenor which characterises both works. Indeed, this intensely personal tenor resounds throughout the *Meditations*. Take, for example, the aforementioned expression of near-despair uttered by Descartes at the beginning of the Second Meditation, when he is struggling against the seemingly overwhelming force of the doubt he evoked in the previous meditation:

²⁰⁷ Ignatius, 'Thirteenth Annotation' *Spiritual Exercises* [13], 6

²⁰⁸ Descartes, 'Author's Replies to the Second Set of Objections', 113

So serious are the doubts into which I have been thrown as a result of yesterday's meditation that I can neither put them out of my mind nor see any way of resolving them. It feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles me around so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim up to the top.²⁰⁹

The dramatic imagery employed here makes Descartes' situation here appear very real, and the reader is thereby drawn into the situation, as though they were experiencing it for themselves for the first time. The honesty displayed by Descartes here is involving and gives weight to Descartes' claim that he understands the difficulty of the task undertaken in the *Meditations*.

That said, both Ignatius and Descartes follow their acknowledgements of the difficulty of the task with a demonstration of resilience, so as to show to their reader the attitude of self-effort that is required for any gain to be made from the process of meditation. Whilst the portrayal of despair is very involving, what is important is how the meditator moves *beyond* this point and, by virtue of this perseverance, begins to reap the rewards of his effort. When a point of 'desolation' is reached in the *Spiritual Exercises*, the reaction of the individual is vital to the continuation of the meditational process, because 'self-initiated and self-sustained activity throughout the retreat is the best and ultimately the only human guarantee of the continuing efficacy of the *Exercises*':²¹⁰

Thus it is always necessary to combat this temptation and this desolation in order to prevail, by extending the Exercise beyond the decided hour. In this manner, we learn not only to resist the adversary, but also to defeat him.²¹¹

²⁰⁹ Descartes, 'Second Meditation', *Meditations*, 16

²¹⁰ Stohrer, 22

²¹¹ Ignatius, 'Thirteenth Annotation', *Spiritual Exercises* [13], 6

Similarly, it is the reaction to this sense of despair that is the crucial moment for Descartes in the *Meditations*. Although he feels a sense of disorientation, panic and despair, it is important that he reacts with a strong statement to the contrary, and thereby reiterates his aim: ‘nevertheless I will make an effort and once more attempt the same path which I started on yesterday.’²¹² It clearly takes a significant, conscious effort for Descartes to continue on his quest for the Archimedean point, ‘just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable.’²¹³ The reader is thereby implicitly expected to demonstrate a similar spirit of resilience.

This concept of the reader being expected to react in similar ways to the narrators of the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Meditations* respectively is best expressed on two levels. Firstly, on one level, the intensely personal nature of the experiences depicted expresses the autobiographical aspect to their writing; both texts are, crucially, based on the personal experience of the writer, before being extended to a wider readership. Secondly, and relatedly, this experiential aspect informs how the reader should approach the texts, too. By bringing the autobiographical element to the presentation of the exercises, both Ignatius and Descartes lead by example. They use their particular experiences to relay to their reader how best to undertake the activity of meditational thinking, which lends a further dimension to the oft-quoted Cartesian dictate: ‘I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously with me’.²¹⁴ In such a way, Descartes, as an echo of Ignatius, ‘has the leading part of the director of the retreat, outlining the subject and order of the meditations but leaving to the novice the actual task of meditating and drawing his own conclusions.’²¹⁵

In such a way, the participation of the reader becomes a central element in the text, as has become clear in the discussion of meditation as a ‘thinking in progress’, and as will gain further clarity in the discussion of ‘meditation as transformation’, later on in this chapter. Descartes achieves this partly by his use of the “I” form in his

²¹² Descartes, ‘Second Meditation’, *Meditations*, 16

²¹³ Ibid., 16

²¹⁴ Descartes, ‘Preface to the reader’, *Meditations*, 8

²¹⁵ Beck, 37

writing. Both the quotation above, concerning the despair at the opening of the Second Meditation, and the establishment of the *cogito*, for example, use the first person pronoun, which has an involving function, making the reader feel as if they are living it themselves, and for the first time. Consequently, the ‘I’ ‘persona has a universal as well as a singular value. The reader identifies himself with the persona in order to live the experiment.’²¹⁶ It is important to both Ignatius’ and Descartes’ respective projects that the reader – or retreatant – is ‘no mere observer but an agent in the same process’,²¹⁷ and therefore participating fully in the process. Descartes uses the first person pronoun to create this element of reader participation, and it is one which is vital to his project; this emulates the Ignatian emphasis on participation, something which has become clear in the course of this discussion regarding individual effort and attitude. If the importance of participation can be emphasised, ‘the retreatant himself, in his vulnerability as well as in his dignity, is assumed to be the sovereign, integrating centre of theological meaning and experience.’²¹⁸ Ignatius and Descartes therefore need to provide ‘explicit directives that urge self-initiated and total participation in the complex reflective processes that are to follow’,²¹⁹ in order to ensure the right attitude is present and maintained. It is worth quoting Valéry at length here as he phrases so eloquently the effect of the use of the first person pronoun on the reader:

Never before Descartes had any philosopher so deliberately displayed himself upon the stage of his thought, showing himself off, daring to use the first personal pronoun throughout whole pages. And never, as Descartes above all did with great brilliance of style when he wrote his *Meditations*, had any philosopher so gone out of his way to convey to us the details of his mind, to make those details our own, to make us like unto him, to make us, like him, uncertain and then certain, after we have followed him and, as it were, wedded ourselves to him in his course from doubt to doubt and finally to that

²¹⁶ R. Champigny, ‘The Theatrical Aspect of the Cogito’, *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Mar., 1959), 374

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20123711> (11/05/2011)

²¹⁷ Lang, 34

²¹⁸ Stohrer, 22

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20

purest, that least personal of *I*'s which must be the same in all men, the universal in each of us.²²⁰

What this section has established is that individual effort and the role of participation are elements of central importance to Descartes, and that the way in which he conveys these emphases is informative for our understanding of both his motivations, and what he hopes to achieve in his project. The clear affinities with the *Spiritual Exercises*, regarding 'attitudinal directives' evidence some significant textual connection between the two meditational works, and the influence of Ignatius upon Descartes' writing is evident. It will become even more evident as we move into the next section of this chapter, which focuses on what could be considered a further directive to the reader, the role of solitude and catharsis in the meditational process.

Solitude and Catharsis

'The Strategic Value of Solitude'

I was, at that time, in Germany ... the onset of winter held me up in quarters in which, finding no company to distract me, and having, fortunately, no cares or passions to disturb me, I spent the whole day shut up in a room heated by an enclosed stove, where I had complete leisure to meditate on my own thoughts...²²¹

This part of the story, recounted in the *Discourse on Method*, is well known. I quote it here because the situation described is a key factor in assessing Descartes' relationship to the genre of meditational writing. That Descartes' experience results from a period of intense solitude, whereby he can concentrate without distraction,

²²⁰ P. Valéry, in Beck, 35

²²¹ Descartes, 'Discourse on Method', in *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*, trans. F.E. Sutcliffe (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1984), 35

leads him to implicitly recommend to his reader the value of being alone with one's thoughts. That he has achieved the 'general demolition of [his] opinions', and the rebuilding of the edifice of knowledge, in an atmosphere of solitude, means that he emphasises the importance of being alone in order to harvest any fruit from philosophical investigation. This aspect of his thought is strikingly similar to that of Ignatius' in the *Spiritual Exercises*; Ignatius explicitly recommends to his reader the value of solitude, in order to persuade them of the benefits available to be gained from the exercises performed within such an environment of contemplation in solitude. What this shows is that both Ignatius and Descartes place a premium on the value of creating the right environment in which to carry out their meditations. Furthermore, and important to the investigation of this thesis, 'the privacy that Descartes habitually cultivated had characteristics that were in many respects similar to those of an extended retreat experience',²²² thereby giving possible grounds for establishing a further connection between the two writers. This part of the chapter will, therefore, explore the shape this similarity takes, regarding their emphasis on solitude, and assess how Descartes channels this Ignatian influence into his *Meditations*. I will argue that the element of solitude is key to the project of the *Meditations*, and this becomes particularly clear when the cathartic element of solitude is considered.

Both Ignatius and Descartes strongly recommend a withdrawal into solitude as the ideal environment for meditational activity. Ignatius, for example, writes that

If someone is freer from usual business and wishes to obtain the greatest possible spiritual fruit ... he will derive all the greater benefit in his spiritual life because he will separate himself more from his friends and acquaintances and from all human concerns, for example, by leaving his home for another one or a more retired room where he will be freely and safely able to attend Holy Mass or Vespers as he desires, without being prevented by any person of his acquaintance.²²³

²²² Stohrer, 17

²²³ Ignatius, 'Twentieth Annotation', *Spiritual Exercises* [20], 9

This is strikingly similar to Descartes' requirement of solitude in the *Meditations*:

Today I have expressly rid my mind of all worries and arranged for myself a clear stretch of free time. I am here quite alone, and at last I will devote myself sincerely and without reservation to the general demolition of my opinions.²²⁴

What is more, in terms of the motivations behind this advocacy of solitude, there is a clear alignment of aim between Ignatius and Descartes. To explore this, it is helpful to consider the three reasons Ignatius gives the retreatant to explain why solitude is so important to meditation.²²⁵ Firstly, solitude is portrayed as for a worthy cause, and from which one 'merits no small favour from God.' Secondly, by

All his mind concentrating and reflecting upon only one matter, which is to honour God his Creator and to care for the salvation of his soul, he can apply his natural energies more freely and faster for whatever he desires so much to achieve.

This reasoning, rooted in the basic need for focus and lack of distraction in order to achieve the aim of the exercise efficiently and effectively, is also identifiable in the *Meditations*, as the scene in the stove heated room shows; Descartes evidences a need to be in solitude in order to concentrate, and focus on the task. It seems that only when he is 'quite alone' can he 'devote [him]self sincerely and without reservation' to his project,²²⁶ the aim of which he claims, like Ignatius, to be 'the glory of God.'²²⁷ The third reason Ignatius cites is that to be alone and focusing on this task means that the soul is closer to the divine, and thereby it is better 'disposed to receive the gifts of Divine Goodness.' Essentially, solitude is required in order for the retreatant to reap benefit from the exercises; for Ignatius, benefit is perceived to be in the form of proximity to, and experience of, the influence of the divine in one's

²²⁴ Descartes, 'First Meditation', *Meditations*, 12

²²⁵ Ignatius, 'Twentieth Annotation', *Spiritual Exercises* [20], 9

²²⁶ Descartes, 'First Meditation', *Meditations*, 12

²²⁷ Descartes, 'Letter to the Sorbonne', in *Meditations*, 4

life. These reasons, considered alongside the *Meditations*, show that Ignatius and Descartes had a similar conception of task, and similar requirement in order to achieve the goal of their respective exercises.

‘Inordinate Attachments’

Furthermore, the issue of solitude is very closely related to the emphasis of both writers on what Ignatius terms ‘inordinate attachments’.²²⁸ For Ignatius, spiritual exercises are defined in terms of

Preparing and disposing the soul to remove all inordinate attachments and, after they have been removed, searching and finding the will of God about the management of one’s life and the salvation of the soul.²²⁹

Being purged of these inordinate attachments, which hold the retreatant back, allows the retreatant to progress on this spiritual journey with greater chance of – using Ignatius’ words – harvesting valuable spiritual fruit. A similar understanding of ‘inordinate attachments’ can be found in the *Meditations* as well, suggesting that Descartes was influenced by the Ignatian concept. For Descartes, however, the inordinate attachments are one’s reliance on the senses:

Once the foundations of a building are undermined, anything built on them collapses of its own accord; so I will go straight for the basic principles on which all my former beliefs rested. Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired from the senses or through the senses. But from time to time I have found that the senses

²²⁸ Ignatius, ‘First Annotation’, *Spiritual Exercises* [1], 3

²²⁹ *Ibid*, [1], 3

deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once.²³⁰

In this way, Descartes goes straight to the heart of the issue, and identifies reliance as the cause for his concern. His project thereby becomes aligned with Ignatius', as he feels a similar need to rid himself of 'inordinate attachments' –those things upon which one has, up until now, relied. To be free of these attachments means, for both writers, the opportunity to start afresh and reap the benefits of a rightly-centred spiritual journey, reliant not on inordinate attachments but on that which is worthy of pursuit. Indeed, the element of purgation, as 'catharsis' or 'detachment' was an important element of traditional meditative writing.²³¹

For Descartes, this means not being reliant on sense perception as the basis of knowledge, as has previously been the case:

Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses. But from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once.²³²

His consequent attitude of suspicion towards the senses is an important part of applying doubt, in order to tear down the old edifice and build a new one. In this way, whilst he reflects the Ignatian ideal of freedom from unhelpful attachments, he simultaneously transforms this concept by applying it directly to the senses. That he employs the Ignatian meditational technique of the purging of inordinate attachments, therefore, is interesting; it reminds us that how he uses this traditional meditational genre is characterised by subtlety, evasion of expectations, and – largely – a process of transformation. Descartes gives the age-old genre a new dimension.

²³⁰ Descartes, 'First Meditations, *Meditations*, 12

²³¹ See A. Oksenberg Rorty, 'The Structure of Descartes' *Meditations*', in A. Oksenberg Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, 10

²³² Descartes, 'First Meditation', *Meditations*, 12

Creating a Suitable Environment

Ignatius' and Descartes' shared emphasis on the importance of freeing oneself from inordinate attachments, and their view that the pursuit of solitude is key to achieving this, suggests that an environment of solitude allows for the necessary 'catharsis' of inordinate attachments and beliefs which rest on insecure bases; as such, the cathartic element characteristic of meditation is central to their respective systems. As Clarke writes,

The *Spiritual Exercises* that Descartes practiced at La Flèche were designed by Saint Ignatius as a way of breaking habitual patterns of thinking, and of redirecting a Christian's attention to episodes in the life of Christ and to the moral and religious implications that may be drawn from them. Descartes seems to have understood the principal obstacle to doing metaphysics in similar terms.²³³

This cathartic element to the art of the meditation appears to have influenced Descartes to a great extent, expressed particularly clearly in the First Meditation; furthermore, the retreat into solitude provides the right arena for the cathartic function of doubt to play its role. How does the pervasive doubt of the opening meditation come about? Once Descartes has identified the uncertainty of sense perception as the source of his concern for the existing edifice of knowledge, he must find a way of ridding himself of these attachments in order to find a point of certainty from which he can start to rebuild the edifice. Treating the senses with suspicion, therefore, he applies a rigorous doubt to these former beliefs in order to seek what is properly foundational and known with certainty. Indeed, it is for this reason that he specifically demands that his reader be 'able and willing to meditate seriously with me, and to withdraw their minds from the senses and from all preconceived opinions.'²³⁴ Freeing oneself from reliance on sense perception is at the heart of the

²³³ Clarke, 208

²³⁴ Descartes, 'Preface to the reader', *Meditations*, 8

opening meditations of the text, and it is, essentially, the driving force behind the discoveries of the *Meditations*. Descartes therefore applies to his beliefs a totalising doubt which pervades all his former opinions; he states that

Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false. So, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt.²³⁵

As Kenny notes, ‘we cannot, of course, test each belief in turn to see whether it admits of doubt; but we can examine the foundations on which our beliefs in general depend.’²³⁶ This examination of the foundations of beliefs leads Descartes to employ, firstly, the ‘dream argument’, and then the hypothesis of the ‘evil demon’; this demonstrates the extent of his doubt, and emphasises his need to find a fixed point of certainty – which he thinks he does, of course, with the establishment of the *cogito*. The application of a radical doubt – targeting first of all the questionable trustworthiness of the senses – involves, effectively, discarding the external in favour of a turn inward, to discover what Descartes argues is innately known to every human mind; this introspection will be the way by which anything can be known with certainty. In this way, it could be understood that

The doubts form themselves form a kind of discipline. By entertaining them and making them vivid to ourselves Descartes hopes that we may prepare our minds for the metaphysics that is to come. In particular he means us to reduce our susceptibility to prejudice and to make us use our minds independently of what he calls ‘the senses’.²³⁷

²³⁵ Descartes, ‘First Meditation’, *Meditations*, 12

²³⁶ A. Kenny, *Descartes: A Study of His Philosophy* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1968), 14-15

²³⁷ J. Hill, ‘Meditating with Descartes’, *Richmond Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 12 (Spring 2006), 3
http://www.richmond-philosophy.net/rjp/back_issues/rjp12_hill.pdf (02/07/2011)

The uncompromising goal of the doubt in the First Meditation – which carries on into the Second Meditation – is to doubt everything until something solid is found, even if that means discovering that there is nothing solid:

Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false; and I will proceed in this way until I recognise something certain, or, if nothing else, until I at least recognise for certain that there is no certainty.²³⁸

Hence the establishment of the *cogito* arises from the totalising doubt of the first meditation: ‘as a preliminary help to dispose man for correct reasoning, the methodic doubt has a distinctly purgative purpose.’²³⁹ In this way, the cathartic techniques of the Ignatian meditation play an important role in Descartes’ project, as they allow the mind to focus only on what can be intuitively known, with certainty. The formation of the *cogito* is therefore

Not the product of a logical inference. Rather, it is something that lies dormant in the mind and is realised after the mind is freed from the senses and imagination by ways of a cognitive exercise.²⁴⁰

That the doubt has a cathartic function – in freeing himself from his previous reliance on the uncertain beliefs created by erroneous sense perception – aligns it closely with Ignatius’ emphasis on the need for the rejecting ‘inordinate attachments’, leaving the individual with an unclouded mind, in order to harvest any fruit from the process. In the same way, Descartes’ doubt in the First Meditation functions similarly to an Ignatian meditation; Kenny is right to state that ‘the doubt is, above all, a meditative technique, a form of thought therapy to cure the mind of excessive reliance on the sense.’²⁴¹ This alignment of the texts demonstrates how

²³⁸ ‘Second Meditation’, *Meditations*, 16

²³⁹ Stohrer, 18

²⁴⁰ Hettche, 301

²⁴¹ Kenny, 24

centrally important the cathartic element of meditation is, as it plays out to great effect in both the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Meditations*.

Therefore, the importance of solitude, and its accompanying cathartic function, demonstrates why Descartes employed this meditational method in his *Meditations*; a significant parallel of aim and method has been established between Descartes and Ignatius, and so the Ignatian technique sheds light on the meditative process in the *Meditations*. What has become clear is that

Retirement from the commonplace and routine patterns of life was not merely a propaedeutic to Cartesian reflection; it was increasingly to become an integral element, even a dominating factor, in the context of that reflection.²⁴²

The requirement for a certain environment shows that a central element of meditation is its emphasis on setting, for the reasons explored above. Furthermore, it also plays the role of creating an arena in which the transformative work of meditation can take place; the combination of ‘right attitude’ (as explored in the previous section) and ‘right environment’ create a setting in which meditation can take place, to its full effect. It is this idea of ‘meditation as transformation’ that will inform the final part of this chapter.

²⁴² Stohrer, 17

An Epistemological Salvation? Meditation as Transformation

A further reason why such personal effort, and a specific setting, are required is rooted in a central tenet of both the Ignatian and the Cartesian meditational texts: that the goal of the exercise is the transformation of the individual, as they go through a profound change over the course of the exercise. Indeed, this is where it all culminates: ‘the guidance of the will is the ultimate objective of meditation’.²⁴³ The idea that exercises such as these would hold as their aim personal transformation is a definitive principle of the Ignatian meditational genre; Hill observes that meditations such as these

Were concerned with transforming the self. The exercises were meant to change the individuals who followed them; to make them perceive themselves differently, to achieve a different way of being. They were not activities that had an external social or material significance, but concentrated instead on the inner life on the individual.²⁴⁴

So the term ‘meditation’ denotes the concept of a transformational change in the individual, holding at its centre ‘self-knowledge, self-consciousness, subjectivity’.²⁴⁵ The Ignatian exercises are envisaged as a ‘formidable task of self-reformation’, of which the task is to, firstly, remove all ‘inordinate attachments’, and subsequently ‘searching and finding the will of God about the management of one’s life and the salvation of the soul’. It is this activity which constitutes the core of ‘spiritual exercises’.²⁴⁶ This teleological character of meditation, holding as its only aim the fulfilment of man’s ‘end’ – ‘to praise the Lord his God, and revere Him, and by serving Him be finally saved’ – demonstrates why the focus is on the transformation of the self, as it is geared to a higher purpose.

²⁴³ Hatfield, 48

²⁴⁴ Hill, 1

²⁴⁵ Kosman, 22

²⁴⁶ Ignatius, ‘First Annotation’, *Spiritual Exercises* [1], 3

We also see this idea of teleologically minded meditation reflected in the *Meditations*; indeed, it can be identified as the driving force behind the process that plays out in the text. As a result, the issue of transformation forms one of the clearest connections between the Ignatian and Cartesian texts, built on this pivotal concept; it proves especially clear in his dedicatory letter to the Sorbonne. Referring to ‘the glory of God, to which the entire undertaking is directed’, Descartes is looking to achieve a similarly conceived goal, but the crucial difference is that instead of pursuing this through explicitly religious devotional exercises, he pursues it by way of metaphysical discovery: his project is

To inquire ... how God may be more easily and more certainly known than the things of this world ... there can be no more useful service to be rendered in philosophy than to conduct a careful search, once and for all, for the best of these arguments, and to set them out so precisely and clearly as to produce for the future a general agreement that they amount to demonstrative proofs.²⁴⁷

Kosman’s conception of the issue of transformation is helpful to draw on here: he writes that

The recognition of the fact that traditional meditative literature and Cartesian meditative literature are “isomorphic” and the understanding that religious salvation and epistemic salvation are versions of a deeper structure of salvation, are important and of interest.²⁴⁸

Indeed, taken from the Ignatian meditational style, Descartes uses, adapts and transforms this Ignatian teleological character in the *Meditations*, giving it a characteristically Cartesian edge:

²⁴⁷ Descartes, ‘Letter to the Sorbonne’, in *Meditations*, 4

²⁴⁸ Kosman, 23

Meditational literature was concerned with inner, *self*-transformation. Descartes, we may infer, was aiming not just to relate to us his metaphysics, but also to progressively transform our minds to make that metaphysics more acceptable to us.²⁴⁹

If the question is posed, therefore, how Descartes achieves this self-transformation in relation to his metaphysics in the *Meditations*, the answer is far from a single, monolithic one. This transformational change requires the aspects of meditation that we have been considering over the course of this chapter, such as self-motivation, total participation, the cumulative building up of ideas through an active process. Hence, for example, Descartes' emphasis on his reader being of the right character to embark on this process – that he 'would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously with [him], and to withdraw their minds from the senses and from all preconceived opinions',²⁵⁰ – is a way of ensuring that his reader is prepared to embark on a process of metaphysical discovery that will simultaneously be one of personal transformation. Someone who cannot relinquish their preconceived opinions, and who relies too heavily on the perception and experience of the sense, cannot reap the same benefit from the process as those who are willing to undergo change. Therefore, Descartes encourages only those who are capable of becoming clean slates; those who are open to being transformed.

One cannot be transformed without total participation in the process; as the reader takes the mantle of metaphysical discovery upon themselves, follows the process as laid out by Descartes, and forms the ideas as if they were their own and being discovered for the first time – all of which Descartes takes great pains to recommend to his reader – active participation necessarily prevails over complacent passivity. Descartes' project revolves around the destruction and rebuilding of the edifice of knowledge, and if the reader is enacting it in the right way, their high level of involvement in the cumulative building up of ideas creates a sense of the constant

²⁴⁹ Hill, 3

²⁵⁰ Descartes, 'Preface to the reader', *Meditations*, 8

and active transformation of the individual meditator; as the edifice is rebuilt, so is the person. To reiterate, therefore, the centrality of the element of participation in the Cartesian project cannot be underestimated.

The intense and concentrated subjectivity of the journey of the *Meditations* means the reader is being changed by the very act of reading, by following the formation of metaphysical ideas as if it were their own discovery. To find such theories palatable – indeed, favourable – by the end of the process (as Hill suggests) seems inevitable. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Descartes places such a great emphasis on how his work should be read: as has been a central tenet of this thesis, how the *Meditations* is read – experientially – is key to its very purpose, meaning and existence. As such, ‘the written word ... here becomes the actual vehicle of epistemic salvation’.²⁵¹ Kosman, who makes us think afresh about Descartes’ relationship to the traditional meditational genre, frames the issue in terms of reflexivity, as a way of understanding how the text’s emphasis on subjectivity allows for the self-transformation of the individual. I think that what he writes encapsulates the heart of the issue of meditation as transformation:

One of the characteristics of the genre of meditational literature is that it is about reflexive awareness, about self-consciousness and self-examination. The *Meditations* therefore announces itself as a work within that reflexive tradition, as a work about self-discovery and self-knowledge. That it is within the tradition of meditational literature keeps this fact focused for us ... the central issues must remain self-knowledge, self-consciousness, subjectivity: those issues traditionally central in so much of meditational literature.²⁵²

²⁵¹ Kosman, 41

²⁵² Kosman, 22

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What is more, meditation, envisaged as a process of transformation, involves – for Ignatius and Descartes alike – the idea of a choice. To be fully participating, an active choice is needed, in order to reflect the active character of the process. Furthermore, it cultivates the key element of personal responsibility, when the meditation ‘becomes a personal story for retreatants when the time comes for them to make an Election or correct their life.’²⁵³

The concept of choice, or ‘Election’, is central to the *Spiritual Exercises*, and there seems to be an identifiable point of culmination, the product of which must be a decision, in order to effect the personal transformation which is the goal of the *Spiritual Exercises* as a whole. The Election in the Second Week is centred around the ‘Meditation of the Two Standards’, consisting of drawing contrasts between ‘Jesus Christ, our supreme sovereign’ and ‘Lucifer, the greatest enemy of humanity’.²⁵⁴ The retreatant is encouraged to consider the contrast between the two figures, culminating in an active choice of one over the other. Interestingly, it does not seem to be the decision itself that is the challenging part – indeed, the retreatant is left in no doubt about which ‘way’ to choose; ‘in order to choose properly ... we should consider with a pure and simple eye why we have been created, that is, for God’s praise and our salvation’²⁵⁵ – rather, it is the significant effect it will have on the retreatant’s life, and the sense of personal responsibility which accompanies it: ‘I would make myself act according to the way I would recommend to somebody else ... if death suddenly came ... I would easily understand that I should choose this way now.’²⁵⁶ Furthermore, Ignatius’ use of the first-person here serves to emphasise the importance and immediacy of this decision-making moment; by endowing the moment with vividness – the retreatant is living the moment just as Ignatius himself did – the Election acts as a pivotal moment within the *Spiritual Exercises*. The Third Week then begins, as a new spiritual exercise, with fresh concerns; yet it is in the

²⁵³ P. Wolff, ‘Commentary’, in *Spiritual Exercises*, 156

²⁵⁴ Ignatius, ‘Meditation of the Two Standards’, *Spiritual Exercises* [136], 38

²⁵⁵ Ibid., ‘Preamble to the Making of the Election’ [169], 44

²⁵⁶ Ibid., ‘The Second Mode’ [186], 48

secure knowledge of the individual retreatant's vital decision made in the previous exercise, and this serves to inform the tone and motivation for the remaining exercises.

The *Meditations* lacks any obviously climactic moment of decision-making. However, this is not to say that there is not one; simply that it is expressed in a far subtler way, and one that is fitting to the progression of the meditational activity. This comes as no real surprise; Descartes' use of the Ignatian meditational style is characteristically subtle, as has become increasingly clear throughout the discussion in this thesis. For Descartes, his debt to the meditational genre is best read in terms of implicit connections, rather than explicit imitation. The colloquy at the end of the Third Meditation was discussed in the first chapter; at this point, it can be identified as a key decisive moment in the *Meditations*. It is the moment at which the tone and wording of the text is closely aligned with Descartes' statement of intent in his dedicatory letter to the Sorbonne; the colloquy is concerned with the glorification of God, 'reflect[ing] on his attributes ... gaz[ing] with wonder and adoration on the beauty of this immense light', just as his project was originally set out – as aforementioned – to be concerned with 'the glory of God.'²⁵⁷ The reason why this colloquy acts as a climactic, decisive moment, however, is its placing within the text; the reader will have just encountered the first, 'trademark', argument for the existence of God, as the culmination of the meditational activity of the first three meditations. For the reader to then reflect on these arguments and come to a personal decision creates a sense of immediacy that precludes abstraction; as such, the reader is given individual responsibility to decide how to proceed. In this way, the colloquy at the end of the Third Meditation acts as a pivotal moment of choice, in essentially the same vein as Ignatius' in the *Spiritual Exercises*.

Furthermore, it is a widely held opinion in Cartesian scholarship that the *Meditations* can be viewed as consisting of two 'parts'; the first three meditations, and the second three meditations. In this way, the colloquy at this point serves both

²⁵⁷ Descartes, 'Letter to the Sorbonne', 4

as a boundary and a connection between the two parts. As a boundary, it forces the reader to pause and reflect, before making a considered decision to proceed. As a connection, it has a linking role provided by the post-decision continuation of the text. The final three meditations are, of course, concerned with the further building of Descartes' new epistemic world. The Third Meditation may act as the culmination of rapid building of the first three meditations, but this is not to say that the building stops: quite the contrary. From this point, Descartes works to establish the nature of 'truth and error',²⁵⁸ 'the essence of material things',²⁵⁹ the second proof for the existence of God,²⁶⁰ and the mind-body distinction.²⁶¹

'Fix it more deeply in my memory': Meditation as a Method of Engraining Knowledge in the Mind

Another key feature of the emphasis on the transformational quality of meditational writing is that it is something of a 'once for all' experience. If the reader is transformed by the process in the way that is envisaged by the author, what is effected is a *permanent* change in the individual, which will impact on their worldview and subsequent decision-making. The newly acquired knowledge needs to be engrained in the mind; meditating on a topic is a way in which this can be achieved.²⁶² A clear example of this is at the end of the Second Meditation. Reflecting on the conclusions drawn from the day – the establishment of the *cogito* – Descartes takes a while to ensure that the knowledge is engrained in his mind:

Since the habit of holding on to old opinions cannot be set aside so quickly, I should like to stop here and meditate for some time on this new knowledge I have gained, so as to fix it more deeply in my mind.²⁶³

²⁵⁸ Descartes, 'Fourth Meditation', 37-43

²⁵⁹ Descartes, 'Fifth Meditation', 44-49

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 44-49

²⁶¹ 'Sixth Meditation', 50-62

²⁶² See Flood, 851

²⁶³ Descartes, 'Second Meditation', *Meditations*, 23

What is more, Descartes transforms the genre of meditation by giving this aspect of engraining a double function, so that there is a two-way process between engraining and individual transformation. Firstly, engraining the conclusions in the mind brings about a (permanent) transformation, as the reader has been profoundly changed by their experience and discovery. Secondly, the transformation itself – as the goal, the end result – holds within it the key to engraining the new-found knowledge in the mind; the holistic reading of the text, as a totalising, subjective activity, leaves the reader changed such that the knowledge itself is part of their very – transformed – being. It would seem that the process acts as some sort of ‘guarantee’.

In terms of technique, Ignatius uses repetition as a way of engraining knowledge in the mind – and does so to great effect: ‘frequent repetitions of material previously considered are to be conducted in order to consolidate those gains already made.’²⁶⁴ He encourages his readers to keep doing the exercises, giving them the maximum chance of absorption and retention, in order to proceed to the other exercises:

A repetition has to be made of the previous Exercises, as a kind of rumination over the same subjects on which I meditated previously, so that, by this exercise of memory, my intellect can reflect more easily about them without digressions.²⁶⁵

For Descartes, his use of the technique of repetition is, once again, more subtly expressed than in Ignatius’ text. Rather than exhorting his readers to repeat the exercises, he is constantly recapping what has been established, in order to ensure a cumulative building up of knowledge, which relies on creating a vital sense of continuity. In this way, his readers keep time with him, so to speak, whilst actually working through the meditational process at their own pace. The opening lines of the

²⁶⁴ Stohrer, 24

²⁶⁵ Ignatius, ‘Fourth Exercise’, *Spiritual Exercises*, [64], 23

Fourth Meditation, for example, remind the reader what has been established up to this point, and where the meditation will go from here:

During the past few days I have accustomed myself to leading my mind away from the senses; and I have taken careful note of the fact that there is very little about corporeal things that is truly perceived, whereas much more is known about the human mind, and still more about God ... and now, from this contemplation of the true God, in whom all the treasures of wisdom and the sciences lie hidden, I think I can see a way forward to the knowledge of other things.²⁶⁶

His use of repetition is inextricably tied into his conception of the project of the *Meditations*. As has been stressed throughout this thesis, the project relies on connectives, continuity and a cumulative building of knowledge; and repetition is a way of providing these vital elements. It is probably that Descartes' use of repetition is derived from Ignatius' use of it in the *Spiritual Exercises*; however, this claim belongs within the context of this discussion of meditation as transformation, in terms of engraining knowledge in the mind to both effect the transformation, and as a product of that transformation. Stohrer sums up well the importance of repetition as a technique for both writers:

For Descartes and Ignatius, continuous and uninterrupted thought process, careful formulation of complete summaries, frequent repetitions of earlier reflective experiences, and careful notation of where and why deeper insight was achieved, are among the primary means for achieving greater mental development and spiritual maturity. Both men consider these techniques of resumé to be more than merely supplementary or arbitrary devices. Rather, these procedural components are integral to and constitutive of their respective methods.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁶ Descartes, 'Fourth Meditation', *Meditations*, 37

²⁶⁷ Stohrer, 26

What has been established in this section of the chapter is that the term “meditation” denotes the concept of a transformational change in the individual. Considering the features of the *Spiritual Exercises*, the ways in which the issue of transformation plays out in the *Meditations* have been explored, by engaging with the teleologically minded character of meditation; the importance of participation; the concept of choice; and the idea of meditative methods as a way of engraining something in the mind, in order to fully effect a transformation.

Conclusion

While the second chapter was concerned with Descartes’ choice of ‘meditation’ as a viable alternative to ‘disputation’, this third and final chapter shifts to a more positive consideration of what it means for the *Meditations* to be so titled. Why Descartes might have *actively* chosen the meditational genre in itself to influence his writing. This chapter had a dual concern, exploring how, and why, the *Meditations* bear significant relation to the Ignatian meditational tradition. These are, of course, necessarily interrelated, as the one informs the other; this aspect of exploration has become clear throughout this chapter.

Picking up afresh the strand of Ignatian meditation which informed the first chapter, this third chapter drew on what Stohrer termed ‘identifiable issues of mutual concern’ in Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* and Descartes’ *Meditations*. Opening with a consideration of meditation as ‘thinking in progress’, these ‘identifiable issues’ included the emphasis placed by both writers on the importance of individual effort – which ties in with the larger theme of ‘participation’ running through the thesis – the value of solitude; and the importance of creating an environment conducive to meditational thought. The chapter culminated in a focus on ‘meditation as transformation’; it was established that both Ignatius and Descartes hold as their goal a change of will in the individual, through experiencing a process of significant change during the meditation.

It has become increasingly clear in this chapter that there is an Ignatian influence identifiable in the *Meditations*, but not in any simplistic or superficial sense; rather, it is found within the multi-layered character of the text. This chapter offers a speculative reconstruction of what the *Meditations* would look like if viewed from a meditational perspective, by looking at the subtler hints at genre found in Descartes' text. This comparison of the two texts has proved highly illuminative and useful for our understanding of the *Meditations*; taking this fresh approach to reading the *Meditations* draws attention to the significance behind key moments in the text, and also makes demands of the reader. Just as in the *Spiritual Exercises* the individual effort and the participation of the retreatant are expected, so in the *Meditations*, the reader opens themselves up to the possibility – indeed, the aim – of being ‘transformed’ by the text and the way it is read.

This chapter demonstrates what the *Meditations* might look like if approached from a meditational perspective, appropriating the textual connection between the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Meditations*. As such, this acts as the culmination of the thesis; it has been established that to view the *Meditations* as ‘meditation’ is central to the very meaning and purpose of the text.

Conclusion

This thesis opened with Descartes' warning to his reader about the challenges involved in reading the *Meditations*:

I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously with me...²⁶⁸

This thesis set out to explore the significance of the title of the *Meditations*, examining what it means to 'meditate' with Descartes; and how this might illuminate our understanding of the text. By asking questions about the nature and extent of the meditational genre on the *Meditations*, it has become clear that to view the *Meditations* as a text influenced by meditational writing is vitally important for a fuller interpretation. What has been established in the course of this discussion is that a consideration of Descartes' use of the meditational genre takes us to the root of the issue of why Descartes wrote the *Meditations* in the way that he did; and why he wrote it at all. I can therefore conclude that to approach this text from a meditational perspective is highly illuminative for a deeper understanding of the *Meditations*, thus rendering the title hugely significant.

Having identified particular shortcomings within some current scholarship on the *Meditations* – namely, the issue of the compartmentalisation of 'problems' and 'issues' within the text; and the sidelining of 'literary' concerns in favour of 'philosophical' concerns – the thesis held as its premise the need to find a fresh approach to the text. This would involve the rejection of the perceived dichotomy between 'literary' and 'philosophical' approaches, and suggest that an integrated approach is the way forward. As a result, the thesis has not been concerned with solving Cartesian 'problems' – although I have suggested ways that these areas of difficulty within the *Meditations* could be approached more sympathetically, by

²⁶⁸ Descartes, 'Preface to the Reader', *Meditations*, 8

being aware of their proper role and context within the whole text – but rather with attentiveness to the way the text hangs together as a whole, and therefore the importance of the way that it is read. Considering the significance of the title of the *Meditations*, reading the text as a piece of writing influenced by the meditational tradition has been shown to be highly illuminative for our understanding.

Indeed, what is clear from this discussion is that the way the text is read is crucial in shedding light on the multi-layered and complex meaning of the *Meditations*, Descartes' motivation for writing it, and the transformative effect it can have on the reader. Furthermore, the way in which reading is, for Descartes, an act of participation means that to read the text is an experience which impacts on the reader. He invites his readers to meditate *with* him, thereby inviting them to be involved in the text's very development. This was emphasised most strongly in the third chapter – by a consideration of meditation as an act of transformation – but it also constituted a key thread running throughout the thesis, expressed as the idea of reader participation.

To summarise in broad terms what has been explored in this thesis, it first of all examined the history of the genre of meditational writing, in order to establish a basic historical-biographical connection between Ignatius and Descartes. It then drew on Vendler's presentation of various parallels between the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Meditations*, in order to demonstrate the danger of overstating the textual connection. The second chapter shifted the focus to giving Descartes a 'voice'; examining the *Objections* and *Replies* correspondence between Descartes and his contemporaries proved illuminating as to why Descartes chose to so title the *Meditations*. The third and final chapter was more constructive in character, focusing on a consideration of why Descartes might have actively chosen the meditational genre; it simultaneously explored how the Ignatian meditational genre plays out in the *Meditations*. It became increasingly clear that the title of the *Meditations* is highly significant, and approaching the text from this meditational perspective revealed the text to have a powerful, transformative effect on the reader.

A look back at the findings of each individual chapter indicates the conclusions which can be drawn from this thesis as a whole. Chapter One, therefore, outlined the history of the tradition of meditational writing, from Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, through St. Augustine's *Confessions*, culminating in the introduction of the figure of St. Ignatius of Loyola, and his influential meditational writing, the *Spiritual Exercises*. Charting the development of this tradition emphasised that although Descartes is influenced by the genre of meditation in a very particular way, he is still a product of the tradition; as such, his work must be viewed in this context of the evolution of this meditational tradition. However, as becomes increasingly clear in the course of the thesis, by integrating this spiritual tradition into his philosophical work, Descartes is also a transformer of genre. The chapter went on to consider how Descartes would have been familiar with Ignatius' work, suggesting that it would have been a result of his Jesuit education, and his experience of the Ignatian style of religious retreat. Noting some key features of the *Spiritual Exercises* at this stage informed later discussion of if, and how, parallels can be drawn between Ignatius' text and the *Meditations*.

The critique of Vendler's article, regarding possible parallels between the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Meditations*, demonstrated the risk of misrepresentation entailed by drawing superficial or tenuous connections between the texts. Vendler's overstatement of the connection was shown to oversimplify both the texts, and the complex relationship between them. This warning was used as a springboard into the thesis' concern of appropriating the connection between the *Meditations* and the Ignatian meditational genre, in order to yield fruitful interpretation. That the opening chapter drew attention to this problematic approach to making the textual connection was important for informing the findings of the rest of the thesis. This became particularly clear in the third chapter, when the strand of Ignatian meditation was picked up again more specifically; having established at an early stage that an overstatement of the connection risked misrepresenting both Ignatius' and Descartes' projects, the third chapter was able to appropriate the connection. It was with this

warning in mind that the final chapter was able to present a speculative reconstruction of what the *Meditations* might look like when viewed from a meditational perspective, thereby demonstrating the significance of the influence of the meditational genre on the text. However, Vendler did draw attention to an important point; that there does seem to be some degree of connection between the two texts. As such, much of the remainder of the thesis was concerned with appropriating this connection.

Furthermore, this chapter briefly focused on a consideration of the foundationalist and coherentist elements of the *Meditations*; it was suggested that the *Meditations* evidences a shift between foundationalism and coherentism, as epistemological options. This was not found to be problematic; indeed, this laid the groundwork for Chapter Three's sympathetic response to the charge of circularity. This further highlights the interdependency of elements within the *Meditations*, thereby drawing attention once again to the importance of considering the way the text is approached.

Chapter Two shifted the focus to giving Descartes a 'voice', by examining his comments on why he titled his work *Meditations*. His reasons were framed by a general distaste for the dominant mode of philosophising of his day, 'disputation'. 'Meditation' is presented as a viable alternative, it would seem, not a reason in itself. The challenge presented by this, therefore, was to unpack what Descartes meant by this; a key part of this was to contextualise the meditation-disputation dichotomy within the wider epistemological distinctions considered by Descartes at the time of writing. This challenge proved fruitful; it led to a discussion of the distinction between analytic and synthetic reasoning, and of the role of syllogism and intuition in Descartes' thought, in order to build a picture of the epistemological system at work in the text.

These considerations built up into a consideration of the *cogito* section of the *Meditations*, implementing the chapter's findings in a case study. This demonstrated

how the aforementioned epistemological aspects of Descartes' writing come together in an important moment of the *Meditations*. The implications of this for the charge of circularity commonly levelled at the *Meditations* were that this difficult part of the text was found to be less problematic – less 'viciously' circular – when viewed in the context of the chapter's important epistemological findings. Consequently, this chapter demonstrated how a consideration of why Descartes employed 'meditation' rather than 'disputation', for example, can illuminate the *Meditations* more widely, and bring about a more sympathetic interpretation of seemingly problematic parts.

The third chapter built on the findings of the second chapter, by asking why Descartes might have *actively* chosen the meditational style for his work, rather than employing it merely as a viable alternative to disputation. This final chapter picked up again the strand of Ignatian meditation introduced in the first chapter, considering what form this textual connection might take, and how the meditational influence might play out in the *Meditations*. As such, it constitutes a more 'constructive' part to the thesis, as a speculative reconstruction of what the text might look like when approached from a meditational perspective. In response to the opening questions – how could have the *Spiritual Exercises* have informed the *Meditations*; and why would Descartes have sought this affinity? – what became increasingly clear in this chapter was that the meditational genre not only clearly informed his work, but shaped it.

To meet the aim of establishing possible reasons why Descartes would have chosen the (Ignatian) meditational genre to inform his *Meditations*, the chapter drew on what Stohrer termed 'identifiable issues of mutual concern' to the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Meditations*. This section of the paper considered some areas of affinity between the texts, focusing also on the literary techniques used to achieve these important features. Meditation as an active 'thinking in progress' – the idea that reading the text involves a 'doing' – was shown to be important; the act of reading is not passive, but necessarily active. This fed into a more detailed discussion of the importance of individual effort and participation in reading the *Meditations*, a theme that ran throughout the thesis. The factors of the need for solitude, and the idea of

meditation as catharsis, demonstrated the authors' similar concerns about the importance of creating an environment conducive to productive meditational thought. This was shown to involve the shunning of 'inordinate attachments', as a key stage in the cathartic function of meditational thought. The reader must undergo a cathartic experience of ridding themselves of inordinate attachments before the constructive work of meditational thought can be done. Finally, the vision of 'meditation as transformation' is so clearly a driving force for both Ignatius and Descartes: the goal of both texts is, uncompromisingly, the transformation of the individual. Again, the total participation of the reader is assumed, in order to reap the transformative benefits of such exercises.

Despite some differences, due to the particularity of each respective text, there are certainly identifiable echoes of Ignatian concerns and emphases in the *Meditations*. It is important to understand that this chapter was not concerned with parallels drawn on the basis of superficial and tenuous similarities (as was critiqued in the first chapter), but focused rather on more implicit, and subtler, connections between the texts. It is on this basis that the influence of the Ignatian meditational genre on the *Meditations* can be most effectively assessed. This final chapter presents a picture of what the *Meditations* look like when read from a meditational perspective, and this proves to be highly illuminative for a deeper and fuller understanding of its contents.

The findings of this thesis are hopefully significant for the future of the *Meditations*' reception. In this project, the *Meditations* has been reconsidered, in light of the significance of the influence of meditation in interpreting the text, and this has been shown to be illuminative. Furthermore, the way that this 'meditational' approach to the text has enabled classic Cartesian 'problems' to become less threatening to his system demonstrates that considerations of style and genre (informed by close attention to the work's title) can alter the way we interpret, and thereby judge, the *Meditations*. To echo the introduction to this thesis, the lasting impression I want to give to the reader is of the importance of being attentive to the title of Descartes' work, as reading from the *Meditations* from this perspective

creates a much-needed fresh approach. The approach suggested here highlights the importance of reading the *Meditations* from a meditational perspective, thereby illuminating the very act of reading.

Furthermore, the findings can be applied more generally to philosophical and theological texts. The results yielded by applying the above approach to the *Meditations* emphasise the vital importance of participation; the reader does not merely ‘read’ the *Meditations*, but actively participates in it. Only in this way is the reading of the *Meditations* a transformative experience. Whilst the findings of this thesis regarding the influence of the genre of meditation on the *Meditations* cannot, of course, be applied indiscriminately to other texts, what is valuable to take away from the thesis is how the way in which a text is read can be highly illuminative as to its very meaning and purpose. By demonstrating that ‘philosophical’ and ‘literary’ approaches to analysing a text are not mutually exclusive, but rather necessarily interrelated and interdependent, a fresh approach to a text, attentive to considerations of style and genre, can yield fruitful interpretation; this says something important about how we approach complex texts.

It was suggested in the introduction that we cannot talk of a ‘meditational aspect’ or a ‘meditational element’ to the *Meditations*. It has become clear, in the course of this discussion, that meditation holds a central position in the *Meditations*; it informs and shapes the very nature, purpose and meaning of the text.

I will close with a reflection from St. François de Sales:

Every meditation is a thought, but every thought is not a meditation ... when we think of heavenly things, not to learne them but to love them, that is called to meditate.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁹ St. François de Sales, ‘Treatise on the Love of God’ (1616)

What ‘meditation’ means to the *Meditations* is not about merely ‘reading’ the text, but rather *experiencing* it. In this way, one man’s search for certainty and truth communicates itself to the reader as the possibility for a transformative act of reading. It is central to the vitality of the text that a consideration of the *Meditations* begins with its telling title.

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